LABELS

A. HAMILTON GIBBS

Fraser

from

Dad and Mother Garner

Christmas 1936 -

LABELS

By A. Hamilton Gibbs

GUN FODDER

SOUNDINGS

LABELS

LABELS

A NOVEL

BY

A. HAMILTON GIBBS

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TO

My Wife

PART ONE

Chapter One

THE family was at breakfast.

That is to say, Sir Thomas Wickens had put on his glasses and unfolded the newspaper at the financial page. At the crackle of it his wife gave an infinitesimal smile as she poured the coffee.

"The morning paper," she thought, "is really the barometer of domestic relationship . . . Here's your coffee, dear," she said. "What will you have this morning, kedgeree, or liver and bacon?"

"H'm?" Sir Thomas turned reluctantly from the paper and took the coffee from his wife's patiently outstretched hand. "Thank you, my dear!" Over the top of his glasses he inspected the dishes that lay in front of his wife's plate. "I think I'll try a little liver and bacon . . . Now I wonder why the servants put that marmalade on the table again when I especially asked for the other brand. While the war was on I did not complain. Indeed it was I, if I may say so, who outlined the intensive rationing that we maintained throughout. But now I see no reason why I should not have the particular kind of marmalade which I have denied myself so long! Won't you please take steps, my dear? It's a little thing, I know, and I don't want to make a fuss about it, but you must admit that it's very irritating!"

Lady Wickens took a little sip of coffee. "I know, dear," she said, "and I'm sorry. I did tele-

phone to town yesterday, and they promised me that they would send it down to-day. You'll have it to-morrow!"

She picked up a small bell and rang it gently. In a moment or two the door opened and a maid came in.

"Oh, Wilson!" said Lady Wickens, "I think you'd better take these things out and keep them hot for Miss Madge."

Sir Thomas's head came up from his paper. "Where *is* that girl? I don't believe she's been down at the proper time for breakfast one single morning since she returned home." He made an impatient movement. "Why *can't* people co-operate?"

The little jab with which he gathered the next mouthful of liver on to his fork was a most revealing gesture.

His wife's voice retained its even, tolerant tone. She had decided years ago that breakfast was always a trying meal for men. "You must make allowances, Thomas! After all the child has been through in France, she can't be expected to get back into our . . ." The words "rather narrow", which nearly slipped out, were changed to a tiny pause . . . "our routine in five minutes."

The maid had collected the various dishes, but before she could reach the door it was swung open so abruptly from the outside that it rebounded from the rubber knob that was screwed to the floor to mark the limit of its opening. It was Madge.

At her entrance the attenuated atmosphere of that room became charged. One has seen it happen on

the stage in process of a dull play when suddenly there enters an actor with personality, and the audience takes a breath and leans forward, tense.

The maid had to dodge back to avoid a collision with the door, and although she only saved herself from dropping one of the dishes by the skin of her teeth, the look she shot at Madge was that of an adoring slave.

Lady Wickens looked up with a quick smile. She was conscious of a tightening of all her muscles. The sight of her daughter was like the pleasant shock of cold water from a shower bath.

The girl's black head was a riot of short, impertinent curls, light as feathers, that danced as she moved,—moved almost with a touch of insolence that was backed up by wide eyes which met the world with an expression that might have been interpreted as, "Yes, this is I—and who the devil are you?"

She was dressed in a flaming kimono of orange and olive green. Round her bare throat she had put a string of gleaming amber beads. In her hand she carried a cigarette case and a box of matches.

She smiled comprehensively upon the room. "Hullo!" she said. "Morning, Gov'nor!" She patted him on the top of his head as she passed. "Morning, Mater!" She kissed her mother behind her ear, went round the table, pulled out her chair with one foot, and sat down. She put the cigarette and matches beside her plate.

"Liver and bacon, Wilson," she said, "and lots of it!"

Her mother and the maid were not the only ones who felt an emotional response to Madge's entrance. Her father had been more than conscious of her from the moment that she entered the room. He always was conscious of her, but it was only since she had returned from the hospital in France, where she had done her bit through the war, that she filled him with a sense of anger and resentment against which he struggled in vain. He told himself that she was his daughter, that he was proud of her, that, indeed, he loved her. He told himself that she was beautiful, honest, affectionate . . . When she was not there he could go on enumerating her good qualities until he succeeded in inducing a feeling of real warmth for her. But they no sooner got into the same room than she stirred him the wrong way.

He was a long way from ever confessing to himself that in reality he was jealous of her, that he was envious of her magnificent carelessness towards life, her taking everything for granted, — even her acceptance, as being hers by right, of the handsome allowance that he made her. He had had to struggle all his days, to worry and fight every inch of the way, and here this girl queened it as if she were the mistress of the world! He would have given his soul to possess that attitude, to be able, metaphorically speaking, to throw out his chest and not care a damn about to-morrow and the day after. But he had never been able to and he knew that he never would, and therefore his daughter's whole approach to living, so far beyond his own compass, not only rankled but became in his eyes a waste, an immorality. While he knew himself small enough,

and it hurt, to feel a thrill each morning when the butler came and announced, "The car is waiting, Sir Thomas!", she, like Gallio, cared for none of these things. The butler, the car, and the Sir Thomas were all buttresses to his self-importance. This chit of a girl needed no buttresses!

"Well, Gov'nor," said Madge, "how about handing me over a bit of that *Times?* You can't read all of it at once!"

Sir Thomas pushed his plate away and helped himself with a sniff to the objectionable marmalade. "I should like to make the observation," he said, "that patting your father on the head is hardly a respectful form of greeting!" He cast a glance at the maid as though to say, "In the presence of the servants, too!"

A wrinkle appeared on Lady Wickens' forehead.

Madge raised her eyebrows and laughed. "Did you lose your stud, or cut yourself shaving this morning? Cheer up, Gov'nor, old thing! No harm done! . . . Wilson, for Pete's sake, what's the matter in the kitchen? This liver is absolutely raw!"

"Your father likes it underdone, darling," said Lady Wickens.

"Oh, righto!" said Madge. "'Nuff said!" She smiled at the maid and added, "Let me have some kedgeree, toot sweet!"

She took out a cigarette and sat back and lit it, inhaling the smoke and blowing out the match with the result. "You didn't answer my question about the *Times*," she said. "If you insist on hogging the whole paper, you might at least impart the latest *communiqué* from Versailles!"

Her father pushed back his chair and rose to his

feet. He waited till Wilson had finished putting the fish in front of Madge. Then he said, "Leave the room, please, Wilson!" It was too much! This girl blowing tobacco all over the breakfast room and talking in that impossible slang! He had stood it these many days. Now she had got to get back into line, once for all!

Wilson closed the door behind her.

Madge had put her cigarette in her saucer and was deep in her kedgeree. The smoke curled up in a blue spiral.

Lady Wickens held up a warning finger. "Now, Thomas!" she said anxiously.

Sir Thomas ignored her. "Put out that cigarette, Madge!" he commanded.

The girl looked up, surprised. She saw a touch of whiteness behind his nostrils. "Stuffy again! My God, what is it now?" she thought.

"What's the trouble?" she asked.

"You heard what I said! Put out that cigarette!"

Madge looked at him for a moment without answering. Then she said, "I don't quite understand you. Is it this particular cigarette you object to, or the fact of my smoking at all? If it's this particular cigarette, I'm perfectly prepared to indulge in another brand, but if it's smoking in general, I'm afraid you'll miss your train to town, Gov'nor! The discussion will be a hot one!"

Sir Thomas glared. "Very well," he said, "I'll tell you! I object to your coming down to breakfast in those garments. Flopping about in a kimono is a slack and disgusting habit! It's not only immodest but vulgar, and I won't have it in this house!"

"Immodest?" Madge burst out laughing. "What on earth do you mean? *Honi soit*, Gov'nor! I've got a most circumspect pair of pyjams under this. Like to judge for yourself?"

"No!" said Sir Thomas. "And I wish you'd cease calling me Gov'nor. I object to it strongly. It's in keeping with the atrocious slang without which you are apparently unable to express yourself. It seems to me that your war service, far from having had an uplifting effect, has left you entirely without self-respect, or respect for your elders. Your whole behavior has degenerated most painfully and I ask you, indeed I warn you, to pull yourself together and realize what is becoming to a girl in your position. I don't care to have my daughter the talk of the place! You were seen the other day, for instance, laughing and smoking in the street with two common soldiers. That was understandable, perhaps, in wartime; but the war is over and I would have you realize that a lady doesn't do that sort of thing now. You . . . "

Madge broke in with that annoyingly sure laugh. There was a glint in her eyes as she picked up her cigarette and deliberately put it into the corner of her mouth.

"Common soldiers!" she said. "That's pretty good! Now that the job's done they're not being invited to tea by Duchesses, eh? It's not done any more! Coming from you, Gov'nor—I'm sorry, but I've called you that ever since I can remember —coming from you, I don't like it and I ask you to take it back! Those 'common soldiers' had been wounded eight times between them while you were busy organizing your potty little civilian police and

snaffling a blinking K.B.E. out of it. They didn't even get an extra ribbon, either! Incidentally, one of them was a case of mine in France, and if you, or any of the rotten old gossips in this village, think I'm not going to laugh or smoke with him any time I feel like it, you're jolly well mistaken! We've been through it together and that means something that you don't begin to understand. What's more, because he's got a cork leg up to his thigh, he can't get a job from any of the armchair warriors and so-called patriots round this place, and he's got more guts than all the rest of them put together!"

The girl sat back, frowning angrily.

Lady Wickens was torn between pride and distress. "Madge, dear! Madge! What *are* you saying?"

Madge crossed one knee over the other. "That's all right, Mater!" she said. "The Gov'nor and I had better have this out. A good strafe clears the air, and he's been getting stuffier every day since I got home."

"How *dare* you talk to me like that?" Patches of purple came into Sir Thomas' face. "How dare you, I say!"

"Don't let's lose our tempers, Gov'nor," said Madge. "It'll only develop into a verbal rough and tumble if we do and that won't get us anywhere. I apologize for what I said about your K.B.E., but you touched a very sensitive spot. In my humble opinion it was the common soldier who won the recent picnic which, as you have so pointedly remarked, is now over, — worse luck! I wish to God it wasn't. It may have been hell out there, but at least we lived. We counted in the scheme of things,

and it didn't matter a damn whether we smoked or wore pyjamas so long as we did our job!" She paused and looked her father in the eyes.

"Has it ever occurred to you, my dear, that I've dressed more ghastly wounds than you could ever imagine, that I've held men in my arms as they died, and helped others to come crawling slowly back to life again? . . . And now you want to push me back into a fatuous, tame-cat existence, into the church-going, best-hat-on-Sunday routine of our early youth! Do you imagine that Dick won't be changed when he gets demobbed and comes back from his unit; or Tom, the poor old idiot, when they release him from his prison camp? From your point of view the show may have changed us into a lot of ugly ducklings, Gov'nor, but you'd better wake up and make the best of it. Be sensible and forget that I'm a girl in my position. There's no such animal! I'm just me . . . Shall we kiss and make up?"

Sir Thomas' mouth opened and shut, but no sound came. There was a tap on the door and the butler opened it, a little timidly, as though he had been warned by Wilson that there was "a scene between the master and Miss Madge."

"The car is waiting, Sir Thomas!" he announced.

Sir Thomas swallowed and, although he drew himself up, he sneaked out of the room without an answer.

As the door closed behind him, Lady Wickens made a noise that might have been a sob or a laugh. "Oh, my darling!" she cried. "What *have* you done?"

Madge turned and flung an arm round her neck.

"*You* don't care if I curse like a bargee, do you, Mater? You know how damned difficult it all is!"

Lady Wickens held the girl tight for a moment. "I'm not familiar with bargees," she said, "but perhaps I know what you mean!"

Chapter Two

BEFORE arriving at the pinnacle of knighthood or at the unanxious enjoyment of the Manor House at South Brayton, just twenty minutes' ride on an express train outside London to the west, Thomas Wickens had fulfilled the ritual common to all male children whose parents have not been able to afford them a university education. He had gone to work at the age of eighteen, — starting at eighteen shillings a week in a stockbroker's office.

He had saved bus fares by walking and, without knowing it, had done his best to ruin a good digestion by years of indifferent nourishment at cheap eating places, roweled continuously by the spur of "putting something by for a rainy day." The fear of that rainy day — a fear, incidentally, which he had never analyzed — hung over him like a sword of Damocles. It was more than a religion. It was an obsession. He had seen his father and mother compete with it unsuccessfully all their lives; so that, in a sense, it was an inherited competition into which he flung himself earnestly from the moment that he became a wage-earner.

Utterly unimaginative, unendowed with any dreams of success, he had been content to follow like a timid and myopic sheep in the footsteps of the million nine-to-fives who flowed into and out of the city daily with the regularity of the tides.

By way of compensation, however, it seemed that

fate had led him to choose his proper *métier*. Slowly, it is true, but surely, he began to develop a flair for the market, a propensity for analyzing conditions and interpreting them with uncanny accuracy. For a long time he used it purely academically, like Aladdin before he realized the magic of his lamp.

At this period, Thomas Wickens was a not altogether unpresentable youth earning the, for him, princely salary of three pounds a week. The rainy day was a little farther off, and, tortoise-like, his head began to poke out in different directions. He graduated into clothes that had some degree of cut; although the enviable, if reckless, color schemes of his fellow workers were far beyond the range of his wildest venturings.

Their talk of tennis and girls, however, which first made him draw in his head again as being something not only far too dangerous and expensive but necessitating a level of unselfconsciousness that seemed unattainable, — that talk struck a chord in him that would not be silenced. He was torn emotionally and financially. The emotions — entirely in keeping with his age — finally won, and at last, with a touch of bravado that was the inevitable reaction to his fears, he became the proud wearer of the blazer of the local tennis club.

That step by itself was not without moral significance in the story of his evolution. It was to prove, however, the turning point in his whole life. For it was at the tennis club that he met Margaret Latimer, and it was the intensity of his desire to marry Margaret that dragged him out of the academic into the practical, that goaded him to his first

financial flutter, and so opened his eyes to the value of that market sense of his.

He devoted the proceeds of his first win — minus ten per cent. for the rainy day — to the purchase of an engagement ring, and then, with the dreadful responsibility of marriage weighing upon him, turned feverishly to the business of reinvestment. Every time he bought he was sick with dread that something might slip up. Every time he sold at a profit he suffered nightmares at the fact of having more money to invest again. Success came to him as a crown of thorns. His competition with life became a vendetta.

Had it been left to him it is doubtful whether he would ever have perceived the wisdom of moving from the semi-detached villa in which he and Margaret started their married life. His social antennæ were not highly sensitive. Margaret, however, was otherwise. Having been educated in Cheltenham, she had a mind above the suburbs. She had always done her shopping on the fringes of Bond Street, as near to them as her purse would allow; and to her the dull respectability of Kensington seemed to confer almost a rank. Mayfair, she frankly confessed, was a little above her weight. It involved too radical a change in thought and habit.

She had discovered that a frontal attack in any matter involving change only made her husband dig in the more deeply to the *status quo*. So she took him rather subtly from a flank. After an enthusiastic outburst about their little house and how comfortable and happy they had been there, she dropped the comment that it was such a dreadful pity that they would so soon have to leave it.

Thomas Wickens was shocked almost to speechlessness. "Leave it?" he gasped. "What on earth do you mean?"

Margaret crossed over and sat on the arm of his chair.

"Why, darling," she said, "you can't afford to go on living here much longer. What will the other partners at the office think if you refuse to rise in the world? They know how much money you are earning and making. No, Thomas!—" not even in their engagement days had she ever been able to call him Tom—"you owe something to your position in the firm. Don't you really think it would be a far better investment for you in every way to have the endorsement of a really good address,—somewhere in the West End, Kensington, say? And that reminds me, by the way, that our lease here is up at the end of the year!"

It was, perhaps, that word 'investment' which did the trick. He was hoist with his own petard, seeing immediately, even more deeply than she did, the truth of what she said. Thus he advanced another centimeter in the scale of evolution; and in due course the *Morning Post* contained the usual curiously worded formula, "Mrs. Thomas Wickens, 142 Ladbroke Grove, Kensington, W., of a son,"—which, when shown to the lady in question, brought to her face a smile of infinite gratification.

In the course of the next few years they used the *Morning Post* twice again. As there was manifestly no other organ in which suitably to convey the tidings, so, by the same reasoning, there was only one rule of procedure to be adopted in the naming of the children. The first boy was Thomas, after

his father; the second Richard, after her father; and the girl Margaret — called Madge, for short — after herself.

At the time of Madge's arrival, Thomas Wickens was already junior partner in the firm of Todhunter, Merrill & Wickens. He was more comfortably off than most other young men of his age, was possessed of a devoted wife and three delicious youngsters, and on the Exchange was known as "that lucky devil, Wickens!"

At the time of the scene between Madge and himself, he was not only the senior partner and a very rich man — war contracts are invariably worked out in compound mathematics — but through sheer merit and organizing ability had emerged from the ranks of the commoners to be Sir Thomas Wickens, K.B.E.

And yet, as he got out of his car at the station that morning, came up on to the platform and was ushered with much deference by the station master into a first-class carriage, it would have been difficult to point out a more hopeless failure than that successful man.

He was like a chicken who has hatched out a brood of eagles, — bewildered, uncomfortable, utterly unable to understand the lack of contact between himself and his family, between himself and life. It seemed as though all his days he had failed to distinguish shadows from realities, as though there were some part missing in his machinery and he was unable to receive or give out warmth and affection. He had tried, God knows how hard, but whenever he had set about the performance of a kindliness, his approach had somehow been wrong and his best in-

tentions had been obscured by churlishness and apparent hostility.

He had always been, and he knew it, the bogeyman of the family. Try as he might, he had been unable to win the confidence of his children. At his coming they stopped whatever they were playing and put on their Sunday manners. He had wanted desperately to be taken into their games, their schemes, their lives; but always they had been chilled, apprehensive. It had made him nervous and of course he blundered with them, correcting them for nothing at all, until they had come to look upon him as the incarnation of "Don't!"

Hurt, he had flung away from them and given his mind and time to his work, telling himself that if he didn't go to them they would come to him. But they never had come, and it hurt him again when he had to tell himself that they could get along very well without him, that he was left out.

He would have liked to pour out his heart to his wife, but that same strange kink in his nature kept him from doing it. He told himself that she should have come to him to find out what was wrong, to sympathize, to suggest a remedy. In a vague sort of way he believed that the fact of wifehood and motherhood carried with it certain divine propensities of healing and understanding. Therefore Margaret, being his wife and the mother of his children, should turn those qualities of healing and understanding upon him and his problem. Because she did not, she was failing him! There again was still another cause of hurt, as chimeric as the rest perhaps, but which drove him deeper into himself and, in so doing, of course brought about the very

thing that until then had existed only in his imagination, — Margaret's turning more and more to her children and less to him.

In some ways the war had been the happiest time in his life. It would have been the happiest but for the fact that Tom, his eldest son, whom he had taken into the firm, had declared himself a conscientious objector and in due course had been haled off in a convict squad to a French quarry. In the tremendous emotions of the time Thomas Wickens had been able to put that fact on one side, to be dealt with later, and then had given himself wholly to the task in hand. He had stretched himself to the utmost, had organized canteens, civilian police, and made recruiting speeches; had bought up factories and turned them into munition plants, and had been in personal touch with government finances.

He had been thanked personally by Lloyd George for his untiring efforts; and when, finally, his name had appeared in the honor lists and the king had conferred upon him a knighthood, the first thought that came to him was of his family.

"That'll show 'em!" he said. "Now they'll be proud of me!"

His wife — and it never occurred to him that she was only tickled at the idea of herself as Lady Wickens — had laughed!

And only that very morning Madge had flung his K.B.E. in his face!

Chapter Three

CAPTAIN RICHARD WICKENS—generally referred to by the ranks as "old Dickywicky!"—had the door open before the train slid to a stop at South Brayton. He heaved a fatly rolled sleeping bag on to the platform and followed it out.

He looked round with a quiet, steady eye. There was a new bookstall on the up platform. For the rest it was familiar to the point of boredom. The clang of milk cans being unloaded from the van drew his glance. He gave a little laugh. "My God, they still do that!—But I could kiss every damned can. I'm home!"

In his mind's eye he saw the railway station at Albert on the Somme, the sun shining on a wilderness of shelled trucks, twisted rusty rails and patches of rusty barbed wire. He had come upon a leg there one morning on his way back to the battery, a leg dressed in a puttee and a boot; he had looked round, feeling slightly sick, for the body and found none.

The rattle of milk cans was a pleasant sound. It spoke to him of little boys shouting as they played marbles in the street; of men coming back through the cornfields in the cool of the evening, their empty lunch kits slung over their backs; of girls and young men strolling hand in hand down the quiet lanes; of mothers singing babies to sleep, with the cat curled up in the corner of the kitchen. It told of life,

rather than the ghastly mockery of it which they called war.

A man in brown livery came up to him and saluted.

"If you'll wait a minute, sir, I think I can find a porter."

"Eh?" said Dick. "Oh, that's very nice of you!"

The man smiled.

Slightly surprised, Dick looked him over. "Er, if you don't mind my asking—what are you?"

"The chauffeur up at the 'ouse, sir!"

"Oh!" said Dick. "I see. Demobbed?"

"Yes, sir."

"What unit?"

"1st Middlesex."

Dick shook his head. "Never met 'em," he said. He let his glance roam over the man's sturdy frame. A chauffeur and he talked about a porter? Odd, that. "What front?"

"Salonica mostly, sir. And France at the end."

"Wounded?"

"No, sir."

"Any disability?"

"No, sir."

Dick's eyebrows went up. "How long have you been with my father?"

"About six weeks, sir. There's a porter coming now, sir."

"So I see," said Dick. "But we shan't need him. He's only half your size."

"I beg pardon, sir?"

"That's all right," said Dick quietly. "Just take my valise down to the car."

The man's face hardened. "I'm not in the army now, sir! I'm a chauffeur!"

"Are you?" said Dick. "I wonder! In any case that's no reason why you should scrimshank. Let's see you get on to that valise."

It might have been the weight of it that made the man's face red. Reluctantly he heaved it from the platform to his shoulder and preceded Dick down to the street.

While he was putting it into the back of the car, Dick appraised the new limousine with a critical eye. "The Gov'nor's been blowing himself!" was his thought, as he climbed into the driving seat and started the engine. "I suppose he stinks of money these days!" He turned to the chauffeur. "I'll take her. Come on up with me. I want to talk to you."

But when they started, Dick became interested in the engine and the road and entirely forgot the rather disgruntled man at his side.

The road led past a high old wall, moss-covered in spots, which marked the boundary of an old Elizabethan property. The estate was now up for sale. Notice boards framed in the pines announced that it was to be divided into small building lots.

"Oh, God!" thought Dick. "They'll call it Station Road and we shall be snowed in by villas and maisonettes and cheap shops. I wonder whether the war has sent the village to hell too?"

The village was untouched. The swinging signs of the Rose and Crown and the Middlesex Arms, facing each other across the green, still groaned on unoiled hinges, and the row of cottages that sprawled along on either side beneath the elms had the same

tangle of unkempt flowers and children in their front yards. The post-office had kept its bottle-glass windows and apparently the identical jars of sticky sweets. On the green half a dozen geese raised their yellow beaks and complained stridently to the world at large, while a couple of loose horses roamed about, grazing quietly. Beyond the village the road ran on, it seemed, into the soft banks of white clouds that came down to meet the flat horizon, only broken by lines of elms which stood serene among miles of greenish-purple cabbage fields.

It was not a very prepossessing landscape. It represented the dividing line between London on the east and the country on the west. Factories had crept out all along the railway, and swarms of workmen's dwellings came in their wake like locusts, eating up grass and trees. South Brayton had remained just beyond their advance, but its recognition of the proximity of London lay in the fact that every night it sent hundreds of carts piled high with cabbages plodding along the main road to the Covent Garden market.

While at Oxford, Dick had hated it. Its alternating brick and cabbage fields gave it, he said, the appearance and perfume of a garbage dump,—a purely facetious utterance which his father argued quite literally. To-day, however, it gave him a thrill. With one or two others he had succeeded in getting demobilized from the war area while the rest of his brigade went on to Cologne. He was still in the state of shock, of amazement, at being alive with the war really over; and the sight of the rummy old place, for which he had only a sort of

affectionate contempt, still living along, unsmashed, filled him with a sense of wonder.

"Lord, how the Huns would have smeared it!" he said.

He swung the car to the left and the house appeared, square, red, Queen Anne, half the front of it covered by clipped yews planted several hundred years previously, a driveway leading to it round a flower bed in which was a worn stone fountain. Legend had it that in the old days a squire, well into his cups, had ridden his horse up the broad stone steps and into the dining-room.

When they first heard it, Madge had clapped her hands and said, "Perfectly ripping!" and Dick had nodded in solemn approval. Their father, however, had shaken his head.

"Outrageous, I call it! Criminally reckless! He might have broken his own neck and the horse's too!" And Tom, then a lanky youth of seventeen, had answered quietly, "Rather a splendid way to die though, Gov'nor, in the middle of an exciting thing like that!"

Dick remembered that remark of his brother's as he drove up. "God," he thought. "It's funny how things pan out! If the old bean wanted an exciting death he could have had it any one of a dozen different ways these last four years. And instead of that he gets pinched as a conchy!—I suppose he'll hate the sight of me when he gets out."

As he stopped the car, Madge came flying down the steps.

"Hullo, old thing!" said Dick. "How's the war getting on, or rather, I should say, the peace? . . . You seem to have grown, or something."

Madge shrugged her shoulders. "Pretty moldy!" she said. "I'm fed to the teeth with it!"

"How so?" asked Dick, astonished, as he got out of the car.

"Oh, you'll find out soon enough!" said Madge.

There was a little more warmth than usual in their kiss, even if they both pretended that it was just a brother and sister business that had to be gone through.

"I would have met you," said Madge, "only the Mater had a blinking tea fight on; so when your wire came I just sat on the 'phone and told all the old tabbies they could go and boil their heads, more or less."

Dick smiled. "Wish I'd had you in the battery! I'd have put you on the 'phone every time a brass hat called up . . . Hullo, Mater!" He went up the steps two at a time as his mother appeared in the doorway, slid an arm round her and led her back quickly into the house before she could kiss him. "I didn't want that damned chauffeur fellow watching us out of the corner of his eye! Now go ahead!" And though he laughed, he held her very tight while she kissed him.

"To think that it's over and that you're really home!" she said.

"All of me!" said Dick. "Pretty lucky, eh? I don't believe it yet."

Lady Wickens patted his shoulder. "Poor dear, I don't wonder! When one thinks of all the appalling things those vile Germans did, it's a miracle that any of you are alive. I only wished they'd been wiped off the earth, horrible creatures!"

For the space of two breaths Dick didn't answer.

He was conscious of a vague disappointment. It seemed as though the whole tone of his home-coming dropped. Without confessing it to himself, he had looked forward to this first meeting with his mother as one of the great moments of his life; and, indeed, the instant before, he had been more stirred than he cared to show, so emotional that he had to take cover by swearing at the chauffeur.

But this careless touch of hate that she had uttered was so entirely opposed to his mental and emotional picture of her and his relationship to her that the relationship itself shifted to a different plane.

From that second they were no longer mother and son, simply and directly. Dick found himself leaping to make excuses for her from the angle of one who is a million years older in experience and knowledge, as though she were a child uttering things which would have horrified her had she understood their meaning as he did.

He patted her hand which rested on his arm. "You must n't talk like that, Mater! We 're all pretty much of a muchness, I 'm afraid. Come and give me some tea. I 'm simply dying for it! . . . How 's the Gov'nor? A bit chesty now that he 's become Sir Thomas? I suppose he 'd have liked us to go on to Berlin, too?"

"Why, of course! Everybody was hoping that!"

Lady Wickens led the way into the drawing-room where Wilson, hoping to catch a glimpse of "Mr. Dick", was arranging for the fifth time the plates which she had taken off the tea tray and put on the table.

And as Dick sat down in the low deep armchair from which, as a small boy, he had been many times

ejected by his father on the plea that it was not good for boys to "flop", he was appalled to find after a time that he was wishing to goodness that Madge would come in. It was borne in upon him that he had nothing to say to his mother. For the first time in his life he felt that all he could do was to "make conversation" with her.

Chapter Four

DICK blew out a deep breath as he closed the door of his bedroom softly.

"Escaped at last! . . . Christ, escaped's the word, too!" He sat down on the side of the bed with his hands in his pockets and for a long time remained motionless, considering the toes of his boots. Finally he stirred and pulled out a cigarette case. "What the hell's happened to me?" he murmured. "Is this home, or not home?" He closed the case with a snap and thrust it back into his pocket. "Poor old Mater . . . this bloody war!"

As he struck a match, the flame was reflected in front of him and he realized that he was sitting opposite the long mirror-door of his wardrobe. He didn't light the cigarette. The match went out as he studied himself in the glass. There was something cynically humorous in the satisfaction, almost unction, with which he noted the set of his spurs, exactly parallel to the ground: the sloping cut of the field boots where they snugged to the leathers of his breeches: the almost skin-tight knee, absolutely without wrinkles: the two ribbons an eighth of an inch above his left breast pocket, ripely discolored, but with no fraying ends: the Sam Browne polished to a warm chestnut.

After the second year of the war he had cried aloud, "Oh, my God, when shall we get back into civvies again?" In the fourth year, when he heard

another man utter that prayer, he had shaken his head. "We're never going to, old thing!" he answered. "This is a fight to the last man, and you and I are wearing our shrouds!"

Now, in front of the glass, about to take them off for good, he lingered, enjoying the perfection of the thought, savoring it with an added relish in that, to the last detail, he found himself to be right. The paradoxical pleasure that he felt in this was comparable, perhaps, to the emotion which prompted Charles the First to a meticulous toilet on the morning of his execution, — an analogy which never entered Dick Wickens' head. Yet as he turned away from the mirror, he summed it up in an equivalent phrase:

"A filthy job to hand a fellow, but by God they can't say that we didn't play up!"

He pulled open the wardrobe door and was greeted by a pervading smell of moth balls, which he detested. "Moth balls!" he sneered. "My God, hadn't they anything else to do? A million women putting moth balls in a million wardrobes! . . . Probably, though, they'd have gone stark mad sitting back here in the dark if they hadn't had those fool domestic things to do . . . It's not the Mater's fault! I suppose I was an ass to expect her to *know* anything about the show. Damn it, I didn't myself till I'd been out there quite a bit!"

For a time his mind slipped away, and while he pulled out drawers and went through shirts and undershirts, he saw again a kaleidoscope of jagged villages; flecks of cotton wool breaking round an aeroplane; positions being taken over at night in confusion, cursing and ceaseless rain; bits of No Man's

Land, desolate as death. A thousand incidents, faces, fag ends of conversation, emotions, sprang to attention as his mind turned in their direction, so that the reality of the moment was swamped by the intensity of the past. The voice of the chauffeur in the garden completed the illusion and for a moment Dick would have sworn that he was in a wagon-line billet. A glance round the room brought him back again.

"Hell!" he said. "I *must* be wrong about the Mater . . . I wonder what Madge thinks?"

He flung himself out of uniform and hurried into evening clothes, finishing his tie as he went along the passage to his sister's room. He didn't realize that he was turning to her not because she was his sister, but because of that odd kinship engendered by "having been through it together."

"Come in!" she said in answer to his knock.

Dick went in and found her putting the last touches of powder on her face and neck.

She spoke to his reflection in the glass as he crossed the room. "Almost unbelievable to be back into civvies again, isn't it?"

Dick nodded, hardly paying attention. "I say, old thing," he said, "how long have you been back?"

"Three endless weeks!" said Madge.

Dick glanced at her keenly. "Mind if I smoke?" He lit a cigarette. "Why endless?"

Madge gave a little laugh. "Oh, I suppose it's being among the cabbages again. Nothing to do but live!"

Dick frowned, surprised. "But good Lord . . ." He broke off. Was this something to do with the

Mater too? . . . "What about this place? Tell me about the . . . the Gov'nor, and the Mater."

Madge laid aside the powder and began polishing her nails. "No change on the whole front!" she said. "Apart from the fact that we are now Sir Thomas, we have retained all our prejudices!"

"My God!" Dick perched himself on the edge of the dressing table. "Go on!"

"The breakfast room this morning," Madge continued, "was a scene of carnage."

"What had you been up to?" asked Dick.

Madge glanced up from her nails with a grin. "About everything that should not be done by what the Gov'nor calls a girl in my position. Smoking, slang, pyjamas,—*you* know! The old early Victorian stuff!"

"But it isn't possible!" burst out Dick.

Madge smiled. "Do you know how far this is from the front line?"

"H'm!" said Dick. "It's up to us still, eh? Don't *they* ever have to make an effort?" He jerked himself up and began pacing the room. "Madge, old thing, what are we up against? I'm shouting for help! What the hell's it all about? Do you know that I couldn't sit still in the same room with the Mater? . . . The *Mater,* of all people in God's green world! Everything she said was . . . was wrong! Everything she uttered about the war, the treaty, anything, made me want to scream! Doesn't she understand what's been going on? Doesn't she *know?*"

"No, she doesn't!" said Madge. "It's not the Mater's fault, old boy. She's been fed on the Angels of Mons muck. She believes that every one of

the brave boys took a football with him when he went over the top! And if *she* believes it, she's no different from the rest. They all believe it. Why not? They've been obediently carrying on, and the only things they've been allowed to read have been carefully guarded accounts of something that was unfortunately a little rougher than a football game, but a game in which their sons were always on the winning side! . . . Don't you grasp the elementary principles of upholding civilian morale?"

"Of course!" said Dick. "One realized that about the rank and file, but naturally I thought the Mater was different. The Gov'nor too, for that matter! . . . My God, what sort of England have we come back to?"

Madge laughed. "The same England we went away from!"

"I believe you're right!" said Dick. "I believe we've stumbled on the biggest joke in history! Here we are, all that's left of us, coming back from four years of hell and expecting a vast deal of sympathy and deferential understanding from a world population which hasn't the slightest idea of what's been happening! What's more, they probably think they know a darn sight more about it than we do because they've been following it in Captain Coe's Sporting Wire on the War over their daily breakfast egg!"

Madge chuckled. "Jolly old eyewitness, eh? Pretty good!"

"The old gorgeous myth!" said Dick. "Because it's in print it's true! If any of us ever get on our hind legs and tell a few quiet things, they'll call us liars,—and probably run us into jail! A man with a preconceived notion hates to have it dis-

turbed . . . And we're coming back to *their* world, not ours. My God, the joke's certainly on us!"

For a moment Madge watched her brother keenly as he marched up and down, chewing his cigarette holder. "That's odd," she thought, "from Dick!"

From below there came the sound of a discreetly rubbed gong.

Madge rose. "Come on," she said. "Let's feed! And for heaven's sake, don't talk to the Gov'nor like that! He'd have apoplexy over the soup!"

"Wait a minute!" said Dick. "What's the situation about Tom? He worries me rather. At tea, when I asked the Mater, I gathered that she wasn't altogether happy either. It seemed to me that she was scared to talk about him. Has the Gov'nor been uttering?"

"Not to my knowledge," said Madge. "I haven't heard Tom mentioned since I got back."

"Well, you will to-night!" said Dick. "Let's go!"

Chapter Five

It was a part of the domestic ritual for the family to assemble in the drawing-room after the gong had sounded, there to await the actual announcement of dinner by the butler. The pre-prandial cocktail was only tolerated when there were guests. Sir Thomas refused to subscribe to what he called a pernicious practice.

When Madge and Dick entered the room their father and mother were already there.

In spite of himself, and in spite of Madge's judgment of Sir Thomas' early Victorianism, Dick was not unmoved as he shook hands with his father. Empires had crashed since their last meeting.

"Hullo, Gov'nor!"

"Well, Dick!"

Being English, they were naturally inarticulate at an encounter of this sort. So they smiled uncomfortably at each other until the older man managed to add, "Glad to see you home again, my boy!"

And Dick, giving his father's hand a last shake, said, "Delighted to see you looking so well, Gov'nor!" and then, with a casualness proportionate to the camouflaging of the effort involved, "Many congratulations, by the way, on your knighthood—perfectly splendid!"

Sir Thomas beamed. "Thank you, Dick!"

And then the two men—each feeling as if he

had shown himself horribly sentimental — removed themselves to different parts of the room.

"Madge is wrong!" thought Dick. "The old boy's improved enormously. He's never come out of himself like that before in his life!" Dick glowed with a feeling of fellowship.

As Sir Thomas was clearing his throat with the idea of making bright conversation about the weather, the butler made his announcement and the family went in to dinner. When they were seated, Madge found that her father had ordered up a bottle of champagne in honor of Dick's return.

"I feel jealous!" she laughed. "You didn't do this for me when I got home!"

"Why, no," said Sir Thomas. "I didn't think your taste rose above cocktails! It takes a man to appreciate champagne nowadays, doesn't it, Dick?"

"*Touchée!*" said Madge. "I will admit that to me the nimble cocktail makes fizz as uninspired as soda water."

Dick elevated one eyebrow in the direction of his sister. "Sounds like an expensive epigram — for some one!"

"Oh, their name was legion!" said Madge calmly. "It was a long war."

Lady Wickens thought it better to intervene. "To descend from what may be sublime to what is not altogether ridiculous," she said, "how does it feel to be out of uniform once more, Dick?"

Dick ran a hand over his soft silk shirt. "Physically," he said, "I feel almost naked, as if these things were all wrong and didn't belong to *me* at all."

"And mentally?" queried Sir Thomas. "I sup-

pose there's a tinge of regret mingled with the satisfaction of taking your uniform off with the sense of a good job well done?"

Dick shot a quick glance at his father.

Sir Thomas went blandly on. "After all, there aren't so very many officers who started as privates and ended up as captains with the D.S.O."

"Perhaps," said Dick. "But there are millions of them who earned it. Incidentally, I'm not so sure that it *was* a good job." Cursing himself for the tactical blunder, he covered that remark with a laugh and went on quickly. "To answer your question about my mental feelings would take a volume, even supposing I could write it."

"All right," said Madge. "We'll let you off with a *précis*."

"Yes," said Lady Wickens, "I do think that you ought to give us an idea of what you mean."

Dick felt that his father's line about the tinge of regret was prompted by the desire to hear that sentiment. Should he give it to him, and let it go at that? He pondered it for a moment. "No," he thought, "there's too much eyewash as it is. He's got to know sometime."

"All right," he said. "I'll give you a *précis*. Do you remember that copy of Dante's 'Inferno' with the Doré illustrations that Tom and I used to sneak out of the library shelves as kids? Well, shedding my khaki just now made me feel as one of the devils would feel if he could slip the ball and chain off his foot and crawl out. As a matter of fact, it is even more marvelous than that, because I have the knowledge that with my escape the whole inferno has come to an end!"

"And the right end, thank goodness!" said Lady Wickens.

Dick shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, if you like!" he said.

Sir Thomas cleared his throat. "Very interesting, Dick," he said, "but to go back to what you said just now . . . "

There was a stereotyped politeness in Sir Thomas' tone which convinced Dick that his father had barely listened to the *précis*. It came to him that his father was not so much interested in what he, Dick, had to say as in the airing of his own point of view. "The prerogative of all colonels!" thought Dick. "Oh, well!"

His inclination was to say, "For God's sake, let's leave it alone!" But alongside that was a sort of curious demon in him which urged him to let the conversation take its course and the casualties take care of themselves.

Sir Thomas sipped his champagne and went on in his most judicial manner. He was enjoying himself. It was all too rarely that one had the chance to tell one of the fighting men about the war.

"I'm not quite sure," he said, "that I heard you correctly when you said that we had n't done a good job?"

"Quite correct, Gov'nor!" said Dick.

Sir Thomas looked pained. His duty was clear, however.

"In the mouth of Ramsay Macdonald or Bernard Shaw," he said, "such a remark could have only one meaning; but coming from you I confess myself puzzled. Did n't you withstand four and a half years of it magnificently, and then push the enemy back to the Rhine? Did n't we contribute men and

money as few nations have done in the course of history? Didn't our women give up everything and go out and nurse you right up to the cannon's mouth? Didn't we civilians, in our humble way, back you up morally and physically to the utmost extent of our powers? Wasn't Lloyd George an outstanding example of the highest type of statesmanship and patriotism? Weren't Haig and Foch a better team than anything the enemy could bring up against us? . . . Why, my dear boy, the more one thinks of it, the more amazed one is at your curious remark! Think of the ethical side of it too,—of our high ideals, of what we achieved for civilization by disproving with our very life's blood the inherent falseness of the brutal Germanic culture! Don't you call that doing a good job?"

Captain Coe's Sporting Wire! Dick could feel himself trembling. Surging with blasphemy, he bit his lip and took tight hold of himself. "Taken as a whole, I'm afraid not, Gov'nor. I think you've outlined the basis of a corking good recruiting speech. It was pretty thin in 1914, but it absolutely won't wash now!"

"What exactly do you mean?" asked Sir Thomas, with a touch of heat.

Dick twisted uneasily. "Oh, please!" he said. "Can't we talk about something else. I . . . we're boring the Mater and Madge most horribly."

Sir Thomas looked round. "Boring them?" he repeated in amazement.

"Why, how absurd of you, Dick!" cried Lady Wickens in genuine surprise.

Madge grinned. "Zero hour!" she murmured. "Go it, Dick!"

In triumph at having won his point, Sir Thomas turned to Dick again. "I think," he said, a little ironically, "we should all be interested to know why you disagree with my . . . recruiting speech! Isn't it all true?"

Dick was intently prodding bread with a fork. He refused to look up. "Yes, in a way," he said slowly, "but it doesn't mean anything."

Sir Thomas raised his eyebrows. "You speak in riddles, my boy!"

"It's awfully difficult to explain," said Dick, "even to oneself. I'm not dead sure where I am with it all yet . . . You see, Gov'nor, you're treating the war as a sort of political fact, like the passing of the Home Rule Bill, or some equally impersonal thing. You talk about it academically. It isn't academic at all. Just across the Channel there's a pile of eight million corpses. Are they what you call our achievement for civilization? If so, my definition of civilization is all wrong. And as for congratulating Lloyd George or any other politician, I think their noses ought to be rubbed in it! . . . No, I don't see that we've done a very creditable job!"

Sir Thomas was tapping on the table with his fingers. "I fail to see your conclusion," he said. "Would you, as a fighting soldier, have let the Germans lay waste to France as they did to Belgium?"

"Suppose they had?" queried Dick. "What then?"

Sir Thomas nodded portentously. "Then, my boy, they would have been over here within forty-eight hours! Once they held the Channel ports I don't think we could have stopped them!"

"Then unless I'm a fool," said Dick, "that rather knocks your ethical, idealistic stuff into a cocked hat, doesn't it? Isn't it already beginning to show, Gov'nor, that we didn't give a damn about France except in so far as she was a pawn in saving our own skins? Don't you, as a business man, admit that the only reason we went into it was because if Germany had won, the bottom would have been knocked out of British trade, our navy would have been sunk as theirs was, and England as a ruling power would have been a thing of the past?"

Sir Thomas chose to ignore the question. "If Germany had won, that is precisely what would have happened, and that is why I congratulate you on having done a good job!"

Dick gave a laugh and shrugged his shoulders. "As far as I can see, we haven't begun it yet! Is anything being done about changing the conditions that started the show?"

Sir Thomas protested. "Give us time, my boy!"

"Time!" Dick flung the word back at him. "Winston Churchill has already advised the British trader that now that the enemy is down and out there are bargains to be had in Germany for the man who jumps in first! Shades of the Queensberry rules! I don't pose as any moralist and I'm not wasting any sympathy on Germany. She wanted to conquer the world and took it in the neck. Serve her right! But the thing that makes me sick is the perfectly disgusting hypocrisy with which the rest of us make all this song and dance about our noble aspirations and the ineffable purity of our ideals. Why, my God, the war, as such, was forgotten on Armistice Day! The last gun fired was the start of

the International Merchants Cross-Country Handicap!"

"But, good heavens!" cried Sir Thomas. "Trade has to go on! If we stopped trading, the international system would crumple up!"

"I know," said Dick, "and that's where I can't see the way out. My argument stops there, but when I think of the hell we've all been through in order that these damned jobbers might have elbow room, I can't sit quiet and hear you talk about the war as if it were an epidemic of measles in the village!"

"That's both unjust and untrue!" said Sir Thomas. "We have had our share of suffering, but . . ."

Dick interrupted. "You people at home have got no more idea of what war is than the ducks on the green! You can thank God for it! If you had, you wouldn't talk about winning it as though it were a rubber of bridge, and criticizing your partner for the errors he made! And if you had a five-minute glimpse of what we had to live through for four and a half years, you'd begin to understand why I say that the whole damn thing is unsound. Don't ask me why. I don't know. It's too complex. But you can take my word for it that I'm going to try and find out!"

The silence that ensued after this outburst had the effect of making Dick a little ashamed of his emotion. He wanted to crawl back under cover.

Sir Thomas was looking down his nose. To a man who had been congratulated personally by Lloyd George for his war work, it came rather hard

to be told at this late hour that he did n't know what war was. He was inclined to resent his son's monopoly of comprehension. A fervid patriot, he had been through bitter hours of sweat and anguish when England had been hard pressed and the enormous casualty lists had seemed like the hammering of nails in her coffin. He even told himself that his was, perhaps, the larger view, since he had envisaged the mighty travail of the whole Empire while Dick had been mewed up on a single front. Then, too, speaking not for himself but for his class, there was hardly a man who had not suffered the loss of a son. It was not fair of Dick to say that they understood nothing of war!

It seemed to him that Dick was tainted with that curious spirit of bitterness which he had detected at the club in the manner of several newly returned officers with whom he had had conversation, a bitterness that he was at a loss to account for. It was especially puzzling in Dick, who had joined up so enthusiastically at the beginning and whose one ambition had been to "get out there before the show was over." What had come to him and to these others? What was the reason of this attitude that manifested itself as a dangerous, contemptuous criticism of the old ideals and standards? Had something happened out there that he did not know about? Was there some attribute in the actual practice of warfare that the civilian, suffer as he might, could not conceive?

For the first time Sir Thomas felt himself unable to sweep aside an argument, to dogmatize. He contented himself with the thought that after all the boy was only just home and therefore had not

had time to grasp the point of view of those who had devoted their lives behind the lines.

Benham, the butler, was officiating with cigars and cigarettes, while Wilson passed the coffee.

"I'm afraid, my dear boy," he said, glad to be able to shift the conversation, "that those cigars are not all they might be."

Dick smiled. "The war again, I suppose?"

Sir Thomas passed it by. "By the way," he said, "you won't have begun to make any plans yet, Dick. Incidentally, I hope you won't for quite some time. You need a rest, a good long slack. But I'd like to drop just a word which I hope will bear fruit when you do begin thinking of the future."

"To tell you the truth," said Dick, "I have been doing a little thinking already. I don't believe in hanging about. It's unhealthy."

Madge jabbed her cigarette out in the ash tray. "You bet it is!" she said. "I've reached my limit already."

"What do you mean, darling?" asked Lady Wickens.

"I mean," said Madge, "that I'm going to accept the first decent offer that comes along, whether it's matrimony or a job."

"The terms are synonymous," said Dick.

"That's where you're dead wrong!" said Madge. "In nine cases out of ten, marriage simply means hanging about in a different house,—although there are hectic moments to make up for it."

"Well, old thing," said Dick, "it may not be a job for you, but it certainly will be for the man you marry . . . Excuse the interruption, Gov'nor! You were going to drop a word?"

Sir Thomas made a bland movement with his cigar. "Quite all right, my boy!" he said. "Quite all right! I was just going to say that if you are not sure of going back into the motor business, I think I could make it interesting for you in the firm!"

"Good for you, Gov'nor!" cried Madge.

"Oh, how splendid!" said Lady Wickens. "There's nothing I should like better. I do hope you will say yes this time, Dick!"

Perhaps his father's geniality was a little overdone, a trifle out of character. Perhaps Dick was still vibrating nervously from their brief clash in points of view. Be that as it may, his father's offer left him coldly suspicious. He told himself that there was more in it than met the eye.

"That's awfully nice of you, Gov'nor," he said. "I don't know whether I told you that they got Jim Hillyard at La Bassée?"

"Poor boy!" murmured Lady Wickens.

Madge nodded.

"Yes, I saw his name in the paper at the time." She did not add that she had cried her eyes nearly out.

"I'm sorry!" said Sir Thomas. "I hope you'll take my suggestion the more seriously as it leaves you without a partner."

He had tried to get both boys into the firm when they came down from Oxford. Tom, with a first class honors degree in Greats and no small reputation in the Union, had looked upon his father's offer as a quick solution of his own economic problem and had accepted. Dick, however, who had rowed bow in a winning crew from Putney to Mortlake, and who had still further improved the shining athletic

hour by knocking out the Cambridge middleweight in the opening of the second round, left Oxford with a pass degree and the full conviction that an office stool was no place for a man with any self-respect. He had met Jim Hillyard in the course of a motor trial at Brooklands and the two had eventually gone into partnership. The war caught them just after they got started and on the sixth of August — it took them just two days to wind up — they walked round together to the nearest recruiting office and joined up in the same unit.

Sir Thomas had not looked very favorably upon the motoring venture and consequently Jim's face had not been so welcome at the family board that he showed it there much. But Madge, then twenty-one, had fallen violently in love with him. He was her first hero and had remained so until her V.A.D. uniform had its inevitable effect.

Dick turned to his father. "What about Tom? When do you get him back with you again? I suppose you've been pulling a wire or two quietly? Now that the show's over, the whole damn silly business of political prisoners will be washed out, won't it?"

"I have no information on that subject," said Sir Thomas.

"Theoretically, perhaps not," said Dick. "But how about Tom in particular?"

Sir Thomas shifted a little in his chair. "You didn't get out of the army until your name was passed by the demobilization authorities, did you?" he said. "I presume, therefore, that Tom will remain where he is until such time as the government sees fit to legislate."

Dick dropped his cigar end into his coffee cup. "I don't think I quite get your point," he said slowly. "If I hadn't told about a million lies and succeeded in getting the Colonel to use his personal influence for me, I should probably be in Cologne now, waiting for something to happen in the next eighteen months at the demobilization office. Unless some one takes violent action about Tom, he's likely to remain behind barbed wire till the end of time. With your influence in the city, and so on, you ought to be able to wangle it without any difficulty."

Sir Thomas spoke into his coffee cup. "It can't be done, my boy! Tom has made his bed and he must lie on it. I can do nothing for him. My hands are tied."

Dick's eyes narrowed. "I see!" he said. "No conchies need apply."

"Wouldn't you be expressing the truth more clearly," said Madge, "if you said that you washed your hands of him?"

Sir Thomas sat up straight, planted not only at the head of the table, but at the head of the family.

"No, Madge, it would not! I mean very literally that my hands are tied. Tom's action in declaring himself a conscientious objector has made my position a very difficult one . . . I don't like to talk about myself, but in order to explain properly what I mean, I feel that I must tell you two what your mother already knows. In my capacity as head of the firm, I have been in close touch with government finances throughout the war in a semi-official way, and I happen to know that it was on that ac-

count, much more than for any recruiting or organizing that I was able to do, that I received a knighthood. Now public opinion at the moment is as strong as ever on the question of patriotism and I know that if I went out of my way to pull wires to get Tom released and took him back into the firm, there are jealous people in the Exchange who would delight in seeing me hammered,—which, in case you don't know it, means that I should be chucked out into the street neck and crop, a ruined and dishonored man. Inasmuch as my own opinion of Tom is that he betrayed his country in the most cowardly fashion, I have no intention of courting disaster to myself and to the rest of you by being quixotic enough to keep a place for him in the firm, or, for that matter, in this house! When he comes out, I propose to make him an allowance and he must shift for himself. Your mother and I have already discussed this at great length and it seems to us to be the only course to adopt. If you, Dick, or you, Madge, have any other solution to offer, I shall welcome it!"

Dick gave a short laugh and nodded to Madge. "Ladies first!" he said curtly.

Madge looked from one man to the other. "It seems to me," she said, "that you're putting the cart before the horse. It's Tom who is going to decide! He's probably made up his mind long ago what he is going to do, and it's my opinion that he wouldn't go back into the firm if you begged him to. What do you think, Dick?"

Dick's face was white. He leaned forward to his father. "You don't mean that really, Gov'nor, do you? You're not going to kick him out like a

dog and then add insult to injury by offering him an allowance?"

Sir Thomas glared. "You can distort my words if you like," he said, "but I mean what I said!"

"I don't believe it!" cried Dick. "My God, have you any sort of notion of what Tom's been through? I met a war correspondent one time who'd been down to Boulogne to inspect that prison camp. He told me that the C.O. was a perfect devil who made things so hellish that a lot of the prisoners volunteered for the R.A.M.C., just to escape the camp! I've been under a C.O. like that myself and I know what they can do. They can harry the soul out of you! Now, I don't know why Tom wouldn't fight, but I think he was a damn sight more honest and full of guts than some of the khakied *embusqués* who were never combed out of the War Office. Tom didn't volunteer for the R.A.M.C. He's still sticking it out! God knows he's paid for whatever point of view he has about the show, and I maintain that he has earned the right to stick to it as I have to mine. Don't you *see*, Gov'nor? You can't turn him loose like that. It isn't sporting. For any sake, reconsider!"

Sir Thomas' hand trembled visibly as he played with a spoon. "Don't think that my decision was reached without grave consideration!" he said. "But it is reached and I see no alternative!"

Dick swung round. "What do you say, Mater? You're no party to this?"

Lady Wickens flung out her hands. "My dear, my dear, what can I do? I want Tom back most desperately, but I don't want to see your father disgraced and I feel that what he says about that is only

too true! They would be after him like wolves, all those who are jealous of his success and of his having made so much money. If Tom has an allowance and we are able to see him from time to time . . ." Her voice trailed off into an inadequate silence.

Dick gathered up the little pile of bread pills that he had made and let them fall one by one from his fingers.

"So that's what we've been fighting for, eh?" He shrugged his shoulders and turned to his father slightly. "I'm afraid you won't have the pleasure of introducing me to your associates as 'my son, Captain Richard Wickens, D.S.O., you know'! That was your idea, wasn't it?" He laughed. "I presume all those poor devils of conchies were sentenced, as we were, for duration. I'm going to shove on my uniform again to-morrow and see if I can't raise hell in the War Office. You see, I don't happen to care a damn about *my* reputation. Furthermore, when I get Tom out of that place, I'm going to ask him if he'll come in with me in the motor game. There may not be so much money in it, but it's undoubtedly healthier than the Stock Exchange!" He pushed his chair away and got up. "Incidentally," he added, "if you meant what you said just now, Madge, there's a job going if you like to kick in with Tom and me. How about it?"

Madge's face lighted up. "Perfectly priceless!" she said. "When do we begin the partnership?"

"We've begun already!" said Dick. Then to his father and mother he added, "If you'll excuse me—?" and walked out of the room.

Chapter Six

THE keynote of the situation could have been found in Dick's phrase: "A man with a preconceived notion hates to have it disturbed." To him it exactly fitted his father.

Naturally he entirely overlooked the fact that it applied equally to himself. There was a certain naïveté about him, a generosity of outlook — the immediate legacy of a public school and university — which usually perishes, unfortunately, as soon as life administers a series of hard knocks. Four years in the line had been sufficient to strip the history books he knew of all the glamour they had ever held. Napoleon, once a military genius, and Bismarck, the super-strategist, ranked now as very small beer in the light of personal experience. To him henceforth war was "a washout", — a word that summed up a whole philosophy of criticism and contempt.

It was only very gradually that his eyes had been opened to the gulf that lies between propaganda and truth, between dying alone for an ideal and being marched into a shambles, like one of a herd of cattle, for some one else's idea, which is utterly opposed to any ideal.

Given the type which Dick represented, and the effect was extraordinary. It was as if some one with authority were to walk into a monastery and tear up the books of the New and Old Testaments and say to the priests who had been living by them all

their lives, "These things are all lies! You must find something else!"

In other words, Dick had never analyzed such facts as honesty, truth, loyalty, *esprit de corps,* sportsmanship. He had accepted them, set his standards by them; and, without even knowing them by name, exactly, had shaped his contacts with his fellow man accordingly. Then the war had walked into his inner monastery and torn up the books. These things were all lies, — not so much individually as nationally, mondially, as though each country said to its people, "You poor idiots can go on applying those teachings to each other by all means, but we don't believe in them! They're damn silly, merely encumbrances when it comes to high stakes!"

So Dick was cut adrift from his moorings. At first he refused to believe it, but when disbelief was no longer possible, his native generosity, naïveté, that human attribute which insists that all men shall raise up to themselves gods, made him cling to the hope that this shattering of faith was confined mentally and physically to the war zone, that it was simply a necessary factor of any war. It was, he felt, called into being by it and would as inevitably cease with the cessation of war, — like a foul miasma that rises at night from the marshes and disappears at a touch of the sun.

Outside the marshes, that is to say back in England, there was of course no miasma, none of the degeneration and decay, the flat contradiction of all that had been right. At home they were uncontaminated: honor and truth still retained their original values as far as the man and woman in the street were concerned, because they were so far removed

from the actual geographical area where the malady was to be contracted.

Such at least was the simple readjustment to which he anchored himself after a period of morbid drifting when it seemed that to go on living in a world that had shifted its polarity was scarcely worth the effort. Instead, therefore, of going out weakly to find the shell with his name on it, he went on worshiping at this rather patched-up altar, carrying out as best he might the job that lay to his hand, — doing his best for England now that she was up against it. When the insanity was over she would come to her senses and all the distortion would slide back into focus again.

But now that he was home it seemed that there were two wars, — the actual one which he had survived, and the imaginary one which the civilian had lived through; and, judging by its effects upon the human character, the imaginary war was the more terrible. At least in the real one, under pressure of superhuman feats of endurance and the constant presence of violent death, the possibilities of life became more intensified than they had ever been; and what stood out most ironically was that while extermination, by fair means or foul, was the universal aim, the quality of brotherhood between man and man was never so apparent. The reason was simple: the common understanding of a common suffering. Apparently in the civilian war the suffering was as imaginary as the war itself, since it had not taught them to emerge from the hatred and suspicion which it had engendered. The insanity had penetrated far more deeply into the non-fighters.

The full extent of this was not clear to Dick, but

he had got the first unpleasant taste of it from his father and, which was even more painful, from his mother. It was bad enough to discover that they had remained in the 1914 class as far as their war mentality was concerned, — full of copybook maxims on the one hand, and on the other a quite sincere regret that Germany had not been obliterated from the map. He was able to forgive them that, because he knew that their experience had differed so radically from his own and that, after all, both sides could be honest in their opinion. To kick Tom into the street, however, was not a matter of opinion at all. It was, or should be, entirely outside anything to do with the war and yet there could only be one interpretation of their attitude towards Tom, — that they were the victims of an unanalyzed hysteria, a dread of being misinterpreted by their peers; a pitiful form of moral cowardice that was the aftermath of the thing they called patriotism.

"They can call it home if they want to," said Dick. "I'm damned if I do!"

He was too young, and too close to it, to see the humor that lay beneath it, — that while they were kicking his brother out because the sum total of their experience resulted in uncomfortable friction, he himself was metaphorically kicking his parents out for precisely the same reason.

Chapter Seven

THE next morning, after Sir Thomas had caught the nine o'clock train, Dick announced his intention of going up to town to see what he could do at the War Office.

"Will you be wanting the car, Mater?" he asked.

"No, dear," she said. "Take it by all means!"

"Thanks," said Dick. "I'll be back in time to let that chauffeur of yours earn his keep by meeting the Gov'nor at the station."

"How about a bright young female companion?" queried Madge.

"Righto!" said Dick. "Be ready in five minutes."

Madge, clad in the much-discussed kimono of the previous day, went leaping up the stairs to her room.

"Dick, dear," said Lady Wickens, "do you think you can do anything to help Tom?"

"I don't know," said Dick.

"I do hope and pray that you can!" said Lady Wickens. "But I want you to promise me to be careful. If you lose your temper and say things to some of those officers, they may try and do something dreadful to you!"

Dick smiled. "Don't you worry, Mater! The War Office has always been one of the safest places in the world, and besides, I'm a civilian now."

Lady Wickens crossed the room and put her hand on his arm. "There's another thing I want to say

to you while we're alone . . . Your father was terribly upset last night. For my sake, I want you not to think too harshly of him. There are two things that you don't realize,—how immensely proud he has been of everything you have done in the war, and what a shock it was to him when poor dear Tom not only refused to go but came out publicly against the war . . . He's getting old, dear, and these last years have been a great strain on him. Be generous, Dick, and don't judge him too severely!"

Dick twisted uncomfortably. "Why, Mater, I . . ."

"Don't say anything now," interrupted Lady Wickens. "There is nothing to be said. All I ask you to do is to wait a little and be patient. Tom won't leave this house! I feel it. Something will turn up to prevent it, you'll see! . . . Here comes Madge. Good luck to you, dear, at the War Office!"

She reached up and kissed him, and walked out into the hall as Madge came downstairs.

"Poor old Mater," thought Dick. "She means so damn well!"

The two got into the car and with a final wave to Lady Wickens, who stood watching them from the top of the steps, started on their ride.

Till they had left the village behind, neither of them spoke. The atmosphere of home was still with them. Then Dick drew a deep breath, pulled out a pipe and tobacco pouch and handed them to Madge. "Fill her for me, old thing, will you?"

Madge did so. Then she said, "Shall I take the wheel while you light up?"

"I didn't know you drove."

"We've hardly seen each other for four years. There are quite a few things you don't know about me."

Dick took the pipe from her, very leisurely rammed the tobacco down a little tighter, sheltered his match with both hands and lit up. They were rolling along at about thirty-five miles an hour and he observed with approval that Madge kept the car to the middle of the road with an accustomed hand.

"For instance?" he queried, taking the wheel over; brother-like, making no comment as to her driving.

Madge smiled. "Lend me your pipe to light a cigarette with." When she handed the pipe back again she went on, "Well, I'll let you draw your own conclusions. Suppose I told you that I'd refused six men who wanted to marry me?"

Dick raised his eyebrows. "There were more than six fools in khaki!" he said.

Madge laughed. "Thanks!"

"I didn't mean *that,* old thing!" said Dick. "I meant that any man who got married during the festivities was either a fool or a coward. You were wise to refuse six good opportunities of being a widow!"

Madge made a face. "That's a hell of an unromantic way to look at it!"

"H'm! I suppose there was a lot of romance in a show! And when you were helping the doctor saw off arms and legs and things afterwards!"

"Yes, but there were lots of cushy ones too," said Madge, "and you know what hospital does! . . . Didn't you ever feel the call of . . . shall we call it matrimony?" She gave a little laugh.

Dick's eyes widened. He turned and looked at his sister as if she were a stranger.

She met the look with steady eyes. "Yes, I meant that," she said. "I refused considerably more than six men who . . . didn't want to marry me!"

"Good God! . . . *You?*"

Madge laughed oddly. "The Colonel's lady and Judy O'Grady! It was the usual back-area stuff. I don't suppose there was a single V.A.D. who didn't come in for her share of it. However unattractive one might be, one was a woman, — or rather a female. There were times when it was rather difficult to remember the distinction. When day after day one had put one's arm round a man's shoulders to help him sit up in bed, it was not so easy to see his eyes . . . suddenly change . . . and remain like a marble statue! Some of us didn't, and for the life of me I can't blame them. We're human too, you know, and those hospitals were decidedly male. And, as you say, there wasn't much point in being a widow."

There had been times in various dugouts when some of the men, recently returned from hospital, swapped reminiscences. Dick had laughed with the rest. It had seemed so impersonal. And all the time, Madge had been competing with it at first hand, — Madge!

"My dear old kid," he said, "I had no idea! I never realized that you, and all the other girls, had to worry through that business as well. I thought . . ." He stopped abruptly, uncomfortably.

"You thought," said Madge, "that it was confined to the French peasant women just behind the line. How the brass hats would smile, and the

daughters of duchesses, — to say nothing of their mothers! . . . No, old thing. The women of England were at war, too!"

They were silent for several miles, both chewing the cud of memories.

Then Dick glanced quickly at his sister and away again.

"How many of the six who wanted to marry you came through?" he asked.

"Two," said Madge, "and both wounded again. That's how I knew."

"Think they'll look you up?"

Madge hesitated. Then she said hurriedly, "Oh, Lord, no! They've probably forgotten my existence."

"Anything to be done about it? I mean, did either of them . . . mean anything to you?"

Madge didn't answer. She was staring through the wind screen with half-closed eyes. Her breath came more quickly. She saw, much more vividly than the country they were driving through, the reddish sandy road that led through the woods from the sea back to Etaples, with a huge moon hanging high up and streaking the road with ink-and-silver patterns. They had dined at Paris Plage, she and the big American, Ted Baird, who had dropped out of the sky and who was to return the following morning to the English unit to which he was attached. He had introduced himself to her on the first day when he came to the hospital to visit one of the English officers. He was there for only seven days, a special leave. Madge had dined with him three times, breaking all rules, excited, stirred. On this last evening dinner had been difficult, a matter

of fitful bursts, of leaping nervously into gaps, of avoiding each other's eyes, of forced laughter that was a refuge for thoughts that were "out of bounds" . . . In the hushed woods whose leaves rustled like young birds on the verge of sleep, Madge had found herself listening, disturbed, to the crunch of his boots. She wouldn't hear them again. In twenty-four hours he would be in the line and then . . . And then the crunching stopped. He caught her to him and kissed her until the moon swung like a Chinese lantern in a wind and the ground on which she stood felt like a swaying deck. The buttons of his tunic were digging into her breast, hurting her. She clung to him, returned the pressure of his mouth fiercely, primevally . . . Was there a war on? The war was blown away like a thistledown. Definitions and standards dropped from her like patches of outworn skin from a snake. Restraint, reticence, the inhibitions of religion, education, civilization, withered and died. Nature called. She was in the garden of Eden, unafraid.

It was the American, Ted Baird, who had saved her from herself. It was he who brought her hurtling back through the centuries to that present moment, to that stretch of gritty road on which they stood, to the little chilly wind that made her shiver. He was saying things, things that seemed to come, at first, from infinite distances, — that he loved her, that he adored and worshiped her — how small and foolish by comparison! — that he was coming back on his next leave to marry her.

Something in her cried aloud, "You fool! You fool!", and in a moment she was struggling out of his arms, was out, and pulling her hat straight, tuck-

ing her hair under it and arranging her blouse,—Madge Wickens again.

To his urgent pleas she had replied with a queer laugh and an evasive phrase. "Wait till you come back. We'll see!" And when, before they got to the hospital, he said good night and she allowed him to kiss her again, she was limp, exhausted.

He had written for a while. Then, after a silence, she had seen his name in the casualty lists. The Armistice arrived. He had not come back . . .

Madge sat down deeper in the seat beside her brother and pulled her coat collar higher round her flaming cheeks. When she spoke, she tried to make her voice sound normal. "One of them meant something," she said.

Dick scowled sympathetically. "Lord," he said, "that's rotten luck! Isn't there any chance . . . ?"

Madge shook her head slowly. "Two needles in a bundle of hay!"

For a moment Dick was silent. Then he burst out. "The whole thing's incredible! In actual distance you and I were only a few miles apart, but in experience we might have been in different civilizations, different ages. Madge, old thing, do *you* find yourself besieged with unanswerable questions about it all?"

"It depends on what you call unanswerable," said Madge.

Like a dog with a bone, Dick went on worrying his thought.

"I mean, for instance, that I'm getting the most exquisite pleasure from the mere fact of driving this car along this road, of thinking of the infinite possibilities of to-morrow and the day after. And

yet with it I've got a damned uncomfortable feeling that I haven't any right to feel so bucked about it, that there's something desperately wrong with things, and that to-morrow and the day after are not worth a curse!"

Madge nodded. "I know!" she said.

"I feel in some way as if the whole damn business of living is a sham," said Dick. "I feel as if I can't join up again with the world as I knew it before the show. I don't know that I want to, if it comes to that! But I'm an outsider, a Rip Van Winkle. I'm either left behind, or I've gone too far . . . Do you ever feel like that?"

"I think most of us are going through pretty much that," said Madge.

"I had an idea that when peace was declared everything would be changed," Dick continued, "that we should have learned what a bloody mess we'd made of things and that henceforth there would be nothing but sweetness and light!" He laughed, a little bitterly. "Pretty childish, eh? Things have changed all right, but I haven't seen much sweetness and light yet! . . . I stayed a couple of days in town on my way through, and I give you my word I hated the damn place. It was so smug and self-satisfied, so utterly without understanding, that it gave one the creeps. I couldn't stick it! I came down here much as a kid who runs away because he can't stand school any more . . . It was rather like jumping out of the frying pan into the fire!"

He stopped suddenly. They were coming into the outskirts of London, and for a while Dick remained staring ahead, apparently intent on driving

in the increasing traffic, in reality barely conscious of it.

Madge turned her head and looked at him, this brother of hers, who, as far as their minds were concerned, had been a complete stranger for years.

As children these two had paired off. Tom had always been the bookworm; and so Dick had taken her as an ally, a lieutenant whom he had found he could always rely on to carry out orders, a gallant fellow pirate on marauding expeditions over the neighbors' garden walls. He had taught her how to make and use a catapult, had helped her to master the technique of hanging on behind carts and jumping off again with the horse going at full speed. When caught together for the breaking of windows or other infringements of the local peace, she had stood shoulder to shoulder with him, taking her share of blame with an unrepentant grin that was an inspiration.

Boarding school for both of them had abruptly shattered this close alliance. They found, when they returned home for the holidays, that each had developed fresh interests, had established contacts which they could not share, and by the time Dick went to Oxford and Madge to Cheltenham, both he and she were living in separate worlds which only overlapped at insignificant points.

Now as they rushed along in the big car, Dick sucking his cold pipe, Madge felt what might be termed an echo of the old child-call. Perhaps, she thought, it was a subconscious memory of it which was making Dick lift for a moment the veil that hid him. She warmed to it and held still for fear of breaking the spell by an ill-timed remark.

But Dick was still worrying. "I confess I don't know what to do about the family," he said slowly. "It's rather like coming up against a case of arrested development. Or no. It's as if we were each stuck with a label, and that label were a sort of measuring stick, a final verdict. You're a V.A.D. I'm a D.S.O. The Gov'nor's a K.B.E., and Tom's a conchy. Do you see? We're judged and pigeonholed."

"But of course!" said Madge. "One has to have some sort of standard."

Dick laughed. "That's just the point. They're all a washout! It wouldn't matter if you and I had done the most poisonous things in France, or if the Gov'nor had secretly defrauded the government of millions behind his office door! It wouldn't matter if Tom and his gang were really the founders of future world peace! He's been labeled 'conchy' and therefore he's a damned waster. We've been labeled 'front line' and therefore we're all right. See what I mean? . . . It isn't just us; it's universal, like the odor of prestige that emanates from 'the Church', the 'Diplomatic', 'Society', and all the rest of them. But it's been exaggerated by the war to the point of lunacy. The individual has been eclipsed by his label, and at the moment the Gov'nor seems to have one of the worst cases of the disease on record! Don't you think so?"

Madge nodded. "My dear old thing," she said, "you amaze me! You're the exemplification of your own argument. I confess I had always labeled you out there as a typical soldier, bored, of course, as we all were, and strafing the staff like the rest, but rubbing along not too badly on the whole. Most

of the men I knew were singularly one-idead. When the show ended they proposed to have a hell of a time until they had spent all their pay, and then get some sort of job. They weren't bothering their heads with whys and wherefores. But you seem to have brought back a conscience in full working order. Don't ride it too hard, old thing, or you'll suffer like hell!"

Dick laughed. "Is that what you call it, a conscience? Well, what does one do with it now that one's got it?"

"In our present day and generation," said Madge, "I would advise treating it like the proverbial dog,—let the damned thing lie! You know as well as I do that the individual, as Uncle Sam calls it, can't buck the system, so what's the use of breaking one's heart? You're making a mountain out of what *is* a mountain, but it's against all the ethics to call it anything but a molehill. I've been home longer than you have, and my solemn advice to you is not to take it so seriously! It's a waste of time. There's not a damn thing you can do about it."

"That's all very well," said Dick, "but it isn't just the hoofing out of Tom that matters. It's the spirit behind it, the egregious narrowness, the petulant dislike of the other fellow's independence of action, the damned cowardice! Don't you see?—Supposing, instead of refusing those six men like a sensible kid, you'd fallen for some of that back-area stuff and come home with an illegitimate child? Would you have liked me to sit and twiddle my thumbs when the Gov'nor announced his intention of hoofing you into the street?"

For a moment Madge flamed again, startled.

Then she chuckled. "He *might* have called it patriotism!"

"Not on your life!" said Dick. "You'd have been labeled a 'fallen woman' and no one, least of all the Gov'nor, would have bothered to get at the you underneath it. That's why all this melodrama about Tom is such idiocy!—Tom! Why, good God, what does it matter whether he's a conchy or a Moslem? It's *Tom* still, isn't it? You've been through the hospitals in France and seen and done what girls of fifty years ago would have been expected to die of; but you're still Madge. To the Gov'nor Tom is no longer Tom. He's some vile thing upon which the mob has turned down its vulgar thumbs and as the Gov'nor has not emerged from mob-thinking, Tom must go! The thing's fantastic! Why, do you realize that if we were Quakers, *I* should be the one to be hoofed out for not having refused to fight?"

Madge laughed. "I know! Priceless, isn't it? But—that's precisely the point. To be perfectly frank with you, old thing, I can't work up any excitement over Tom. I'll back you up in any stand you care to take, but I don't see anything to get emotional about! He's neither a cripple nor a shell-shock. I haven't noticed *you* going into raptures at the homelike atmosphere of South Brayton; indeed, I rather think you said something just now about jumping out of the frying pan, so I don't see Tom eating his heart out at being excluded from the family circle! Incidentally, aren't we three coming to town anyway, to relieve its denizens of much cash in exchange for many motors? Let's get on with it, I say! The spilt milk can take care of itself."

Dick shook his head. "I don't know whether to envy you your insulation or not," he said. "To me the question is n't simply Tom, of course. It's . . . it's the family, life, England, and the way we're handling it, and why. I don't know what the answer is."

The mood for conversation had given place to long thoughts and it was in silence that Dick took the car up the Knightsbridge Road, dropped down to Victoria, and eventually swung round into Whitehall.

As he drew up outside the War Office, knocked out his pipe and pocketed it, he turned to Madge. "The motto of this place is, 'Abandon hope, all ye who enter here'!" He shrugged his shoulders. "God knows who or where O.C. conchies is! I may be an hour or all day. If you want to strafe round and do some shopping, suppose we agree to rendezvous here?"

"All right," said Madge. "I'll potter back in about an hour."

He helped her out and locked the car.

"Good luck!" she said.

"I shall need it!" said Dick.

Chapter Eight

THE anteroom was crowded with officers. They might have been the same ones still waiting who were there when Dick came in two years previously to see about receiving his decoration. The same little girls in brown scuttled up and down the gloomy corridors like rabbits.

The Warrant Officer in charge of the inquiry desk gave Dick an odd glance when he put his question as to who was in charge of the conscientious objectors, and raised his eyebrows without any effort to conceal his surprise when he read Dick's name, rank and late unit on the white slip that he had filled in.

Dick lit a cigarette and prepared to wait. Snatches of conversation made him congratulate himself on his own luck.

"Who the hell's in charge of this repatriation scheme? I've been stuck in that thrice-bloody camp at Winchester for ten weeks!"

"Where do you want to go?"

"New York."

The answer was a derisive laugh. "A pal of mine said that the only way to get to New York was to write a sob story to the captain in charge of the camp down there. You're wasting your time if you think you can wangle anything here!"

Those two turned away and Dick heard another voice.

"They tell me that everybody's got to be de-

mobbed from France. Here I am out of hospital and my unit's on the Rhine. So I've got to trek across the continent about six days in order to come back again when my papers come through, if ever! Beautifully efficient, eh?"

There was more of it, equally disgruntled, until finally one of the brown maidens, with a bundle of white slips in her hand, read off a list of names, one of which was Dick's.

He dropped his cigarette and trod on it, and fell into line. After many stairs and interminable corridors they were sloughed off in ones and twos at various doors by the female child, until only Dick was left.

She bustled along at a smart pace until she checked with a "Just a moment, please!" and disappeared into one of the rooms whose door bore several mysterious departmental letters above the names Major General the Hon. C. Buffen-Owen, C.B., M.V.O., J.P., etc., and Lt. Col. G. O. Chalmers.

The little girl came out, smiled at Dick and sprinted away down the corridor.

In spite of himself Dick felt his nerves tighten as they always tightened in anticipation of a "brass hat",—a species which was the natural enemy of the man in the line. This one, in charge of conscientious objectors, had probably been specially selected for his man-eating propensities.

The door opened and the Colonel looked out. "Captain Wickens? . . . Come in!"

Dick went in and found himself in a large barn of a room with two desks in it. One was empty. At the other sat the Major General.

"A dugout!" thought Dick.

"Captain Wickens, sir!" said the Colonel quietly, and crossed the room to the empty desk and sat down.

The Major General looked up. His moustache was of the walrus type and white. His hair was the color of two-day-old snow, but his face was puffy and purple. He leaned back and looked at Dick solemnly, with his head on one side, like an old parrot.

"Well, my boy, what can I do for you? Make it short. I'm very busy!"

Dick measured him, eye to eye for a moment, and came straight to the point. "You can release my brother, sir!"

The General blinked. Then he leaned forward and picked up the white slip. "Captain Richard Wickens, D.S.O., late R.F.A.", he read. "Do you mean to say that one of those scrubby shirkers is a brother of yours?"

Dick raised his eyebrows. "I thought they were called conscientious objectors," he said.

"Scrubby shirkers is what *I* call them!" snapped the General.

"I see, sir!" said Dick cheerily. "It's the same idea perhaps as the Gunners calling the infantry the P.B.I.—the Poor Bloody Infantry?"

The Colonel coughed.

For a moment the General tugged his moustache with his eyes on Dick's face. Seeing it absolutely expressionless,—Dick called it "playing the idiot boy"—he shrugged his shoulders. "If you like," he said. "It isn't worth discussing . . . So you think your brother ought to be released, do you? Why?"

"Because the war's over, sir; and because he's my brother."

"Then you don't consider him a traitor?"

Dick smiled. "I thought that word went out about the reign of Henry the Eighth. If there is still such an animal, it seems to me that the man who armed Ireland against us comes pretty close to it, —and he's not behind barbed wire!"

"More's the pity!" said the General. "But be that as it may, are you aware, Captain Wickens, that every conscientious objector went before a court-martial and was duly and properly sentenced?"

"No, I didn't know that," said Dick.

"Well, now that I've told you, can you give me any reason why their sentences should be mitigated?"

"Yes, sir, I think I can!"

"I should be interested to hear it," said the General.

"There are two or three," said Dick. "In the first place, peace is declared, and they were only sentenced because they refused to go to war. That, to my mind, should be sufficient. Secondly, if they had been protected by the thinnest of veils from the public emotion at the time, they would never have gone in front of a court-martial at all."

"What exactly do you mean by that?"

"I mean," said Dick, "that there were hundreds of young men who conceived a sudden passion for the Church on the outbreak of the war, knowing that the cloth was sacred. It was not only cowardice on their part, but damned dishonest of the Church to take them in! At least the conchies had the guts to stand up for their opinion, knowing that they'd get

it in the neck. Thirdly, it seems to me that profiteer is infinitely more rotten than a million scientious objectors, and no one has raised a fi against the profiteers. Fourthly, there were or two higher officers out there whom I won't mer by name who chucked away men like drunken sai They did more harm, morally and physically, any poor devil of a conchy! A few of them *stellenbosched*, but they were handed a C.M.G mediately afterwards just to ease the smart."

"If that's all you've got to say . . ." General moved impatiently.

Dick interrupted him. "There is one other son I should like to put forward, sir,—and th myself. I joined up in the ranks two days after outbreak and stayed with it right through to the If you could put that alongside my brother's o tions, at least we come out all square as a fa And perhaps my D.S.O. pushes the scale down o right side . . . What do you think, sir? . . any case I should be enormously grateful if you c see your way to do something about it!"

The General helped himself to a cigarette an it, blowing out the match carefully and placin almost arranging it, in a small glass ash tray lay to his hand.

His precision was exasperating. Dick felt he had utterly wasted his time. The milk of hu kindness did not run through those purple v From the utter lack of expression on the old m face it seemed that he had n't even listened to Dick had said.

But apparently after his own fashion the Ge was revolving it in his mind. He pulled his m

tache two or three times and then said, "Two blacks don't make a white, Captain Wickens. In an undertaking so vast as this war there have of course been certain laxnesses, perhaps even miscarriages of justice, but I ask you to believe that we have done our best. Unfortunately, not every Englishman saw his duty so clearly as to make governmental precautions unnecessary. I regret that I should have lived to see the day when any combing-out process had to be enforced. In my opinion, all those who refused to fight for their country have forfeited any regard from their country, and are very rightly behind bars. Nothing that you have said, I am sorry to say, has convinced me of the desirability of taking action. When your brother's sentence has expired, he will be released. Not before . . . I can give you no further information on the subject. Good morning!"

Apparently it was not without foreknowledge that Dick had dropped the half-facetious, half-serious remark to Madge at the entrance to this place, "Abandon hope, all ye who enter here!" He could hear again the disgruntled comment that had come from all those officers downstairs who, like himself, had been bombarding other generals in other rooms, and with equal unsuccess. There was nothing to be done. The barbed-wire fence that kept Tom in stretched from Boulogne to this office, and there was no cutting it, — unless there was a way of doing the job from a flank!

"Good morning, sir!" he said, and turned on his heel.

Perhaps he could write to his Colonel in Cologne and ask him to make representations by letter.

His mind was already at work on this second possibility as he was crossing the room. He was about to turn the door handle, when he heard his name called.

"Oh, Captain Wickens! Just a moment!" There was a new note in the General's voice.

Wondering somewhat, Dick returned to the desk.

"It just occurs to me!" said the General. "Are you by any chance a relation of Thomas Wickens, Sir Thomas, I should say, of the firm of Wickens and Merrill on the Stock Exchange?"

Dick hesitated. He remembered what his father had said about the possibility of being hammered. Was this a leading question to get him into trouble? If he lied and said no, they could always check it up from Tom's papers. On the other hand, it might not be that at all. Better take the bull by the horns!

"Yes," he said. "He's my father."

The General beamed. "How stupid of me not to think of that before! A most able man, your father! I may say that he and I are great friends, meet frequently at the club, and so on. He's invested all my money for me for years. Well, well, well! To think that I shouldn't have remembered! He's told me about you many times. Why, now that I come to think of it, he stood me a bottle of the boy when your citation for the D.S.O. was published! And I may say that I returned the compliment when his name appeared in the birthday honors list. Small world, eh? I wish you'd told me who you were before, my boy!"

Dick smiled. "I'm sorry I didn't know, sir!"

"Ha! Ha!" said the General. "Very good! However, I think I can say that from various in-

dications I rather gather that your brother and the rest of them will be released any day now, a sort of general amnesty, you know! Of course, you understand, it doesn't do to tell that to all comers, but now that I know who you are, eh? . . . " He rose and held out his hand. "In any case, give my warm regards to your father and tell him that if the amnesty does not go through, he can rely on me to do my utmost for your brother!" He wrung Dick by the hand. "Good-by, my boy. Come and call on me again some day. I should like to see you!"

"That's very kind of you, sir!" said Dick. "Thank you very much. I know that my father will never forget it!"

"It's nothing!" said the General. "Nothing at all! Only too glad!"

Dick said good-by and hastened to put the door between the General and himself. His only refuge was in Gargantuan laughter at the irony of it all.

Chapter Nine

THE manner in which the household at South Brayton carried on without another reference to the volcanic possibilities that lay just beneath the surface of their conversation was essentially characteristic.

On coming out of the War Office Dick had told Madge the news, — that it was their father, after all, who in spite of his refusal to do anything, had been the means of getting quick action on Tom. On thinking it over, Dick decided that the suppression of that fact might not be unwise; so Lady Wickens was merely told that within a very short time she could expect Tom home. Upon which, the members of this group went about their business as though Tom's home-coming were the last thing that interested them.

Sir Thomas continued to go daily to his office.

Lady Wickens spent her time as usual in the practice of domestic economy and the maintenance of amicable relations with the rest of the community by the ancient method of "first and fourth Thursdays."

When fine, or not too wet, Dick and Madge took the car and spent the day at various outlying golf courses, — the local one having been sacrificed to the patriotic plough during the war, and sold into the bondage of workmen's cottages afterwards. When wet, which was usually the case at this forlorn period of year, early February, Dick either went to

town on a preliminary reconnaissance into the motor situation, or they played billiards in the huge room at the back of the house, or slacked and read in front of an enormous fire.

They only met in a body at meal times. Breakfast didn't count. Madge continued to be late. Dick ordered his own copy of the *Times* and entrenched himself behind it as successfully as his father did. Lunch was mostly dedicated to Madge and her mother; but at dinner they all dressed and, emerging from their own worlds of thought and action, foregathered round the food, there, presumably for the benefit of the servants, to give evidence of mutual interest and affection. Certainly the pauses and difficult reachings after a possible topic which they might all discuss did not deceive themselves.

It was a pathetic spectacle. Here were four people who had all done things, lived through an epoch in history, been successful to a greater or less extent, were bound, in spite of themselves, to a community of interest, and yet who, because of their different ideas of righteousness, met together with as much difficulty as four strangers in a railway carriage.

Madge tried to draw Dick out on the war. He replied in monosyllables.

Lady Wickens retailed the gossip of South Brayton, — only to be met by humorous and sarcastic comment from Madge.

Sir Thomas discoursed of the personalities behind the Versailles Treaty, and Dick came back with the blanket retort that there was n't an honest man in the crowd.

In the minds of Dick and his mother, however,

each one of these depressing meals brought Tom's return a little nearer and, because of that, gave an extra turn to the nervous tension.

Madge, however, refused to be dismal. She dug up hair-raising V.A.D. reminiscences and related them with gusto. One night she began to hum the tune of, "We are a happy family, we are, we are, we are!" but on catching Dick's eye, ready to swap winks, stopped dead at the expression of pain that she saw there.

He touched her on the shoulder as they were about to go into the drawing-room. "Don't rub it in, old thing! For God's sake, help me to break it down. It's . . . frightening!"

And then he followed her into the room where Lady Wickens had just sat down with her sewing and Sir Thomas was lowering himself into the arm-chair with a book.

"In five minutes the place will be a morgue!" whispered Madge.

Dick nodded. "How about a game of pills, Gov'nor? Come on down and make a third! I challenge you and Madge to a hundred and fifty up, and I'll bet you a new walking stick to a dozen golf balls. What do you say?"

Lady Wickens looked up quickly. "Oh, that'll be lovely, dear! And you used to be so good at billiards!"

"Rather!" said Madge. "Let's take him on, Gov'nor! He's getting too cocky. You and I can give him twenty-five. Come on!"

Sir Thomas looked from one to another. "Thanks, no," he said. "I'm a little tired to-night!"

"A game will buck you up no end!" said Madge.

"I really think it would do you good!" said Lady Wickens, "and I'd like to come and watch you play!"

Sir Thomas sat back more deeply in his chair. Years ago he would have given anything for an invitation of this kind. To-night there still rang in his ears that bitter phrase of Dick's, "I'm afraid you won't have the pleasure of introducing me to your associates as 'My son, Captain Richard Wickens, D.S.O., you know!' . . . That was your idea, was n't it?"

It was because of the truth of it that it stuck so painfully, and it seemed to him now that they had hatched up something between them, and he did n't propose to be made a fool of.

"No," he said. "I'd rather read. You and Madge go and play."

"Well, if you're tired," said Dick, "why don't we muster a four at bridge. The Mater and I will take on you two."

Sir Thomas grunted. Bridge was the one thing he really did well. But whenever he played with his wife, he always lost his temper. Lady Wickens had little talent for the game and was apt to revoke with a sweet air of surprise that would have disarmed any partner but a conjugal one.

To-night he read a veiled sarcasm into Dick's suggestion of playing with his mother.

"I don't like to play bridge at night," he said. "It keeps me awake. I think you two had better go and play billiards." He picked up his book and opened it at his place.

There was a finality in the gesture that robbed

Dick of further enterprise. His little spurt of assumed heartiness petered out.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Come on, Madge!"

When they got into the billiard room and shut the door, Madge was laughing.

"You've got a weird sense of humor!" said Dick.

"I was just wondering," chuckled Madge, "what on earth we should have done if he'd said yes! We should have made a hell of a merry trio, shouldn't we?"

Dick threw himself into the big settee in front of the fire. "The thing that gets me," he said, "is that the rest of you sit down under this as though it were a perfectly normal existence."

"So it is!" said Madge.

"How the devil do you make that out?"

"My good lad," said Madge, "you don't suppose that we're different from a million other families, do you? I don't know whether men yap to each other about themselves as girls do. Probably not. And in any case your lives are generally different. But all I know is that every girl in France was fed to the teeth with home,—bored, restless, profoundly irritable until the moment she got out. It seems to me the reason is too simple for words. We are all the age when we ought to be married, living our own lives in our own homes and making our own messes in our own way. Parental authority is a washout as soon as we reach that stage, and the only families who really remain fond of one another are those who live in different towns, and don't see each other more than two or three times a year. More than two egos in one house are fatal!"

Dick flung wood on to the fire and listened absent-

mindedly for a moment to its crackle. It sounded like the snapping of rifles. "That's all very well," he said, "but there was none of this concentrated gloom before the war. The Gov'nor has always been a little heavy on the hand, but we all managed to talk and laugh and feel at ease with each other. The place was home, at least in the sense that we all fitted in. Now . . . " He spread his hands.

"Now," said Madge, "we are all five years older and five times as unnecessary to each other. If the jolly old Hun hadn't put the kibosh on things, we should none of us have been here now, except for week-ends. In the ordinary course of nature, Tom and you would probably be respectable fathers of families, or else getting steadily more and more egocentric in bachelor flats in Jermyn Street. I should have married one of your friends, Jimmy Hillyard, for example, and the Gov'nor and the Mater would have had this place to themselves in peace. Whenever we met — for a few chatty hours — we should have felt a glow of affection and pride, and returned to our own lares and penates convinced that we were the finest family on earth, — simply because we shouldn't have been interfering with each other's game!"

"Then according to you," said Dick, "I'm a damned fool to make all this song and dance about Tom?"

Madge shrugged her shoulders. "Yes and no," she said. "Yes, in the sense that I think you're fooling yourself as to the results of his coming. No, in the sense that the Gov'nor *is* going a bit too far in kicking him out. I do think that ought to be nipped in the bud. But then we three should un-

doubtedly get out, the quicker the healthier! That's why I said I was going to accept the first man or job that came along."

Dick remained silent for a moment, staring into the fire. Then he said, "If I went away now, I don't believe I should ever want to see the Gov'nor or the Mater again!"

Madge laughed. "Oh, yes, you would!" she said. "Time is the best little gravedigger there is! One's sense of values is so constantly shifting, and every day hands one a new smack in the face to be worked out. Why, in about five years even this blinking war will have shrunk to the size of a week-end! It's a merciful thing too; otherwise we'd all go nutty!"

She reached for the cigarette box and bent down and lit a cigarette with a piece of wood from the fire.

"Come on!" she added. "It's no good chewing the rag all night. Let's play pills."

Chapter Ten

LADY WICKENS remained sewing for a few minutes after Madge and Dick left. Then her work dropped into her lap and for some time she sat looking into the fire. It is curious what a long way one can go in the glow of a fire. She went all the way back to Ladbroke Grove, to the day when they had first made their announcement of a son in the *Morning Post*. It was almost incredible that it could have happened in the same century.

Presently she glanced across at the man who was her husband. He had been her lover then . . .

She sighed. "Don't you think it will seem rather empty in this big house," she said, "when the children have gone?"

Sir Thomas lowered his book and looked at her over his glasses. "When the children have gone?" he repeated. "Is this something new? I haven't heard anything of their going."

"I'm afraid you will very soon, unless . . . "

"Unless what?" Sir Thomas moved irritably. "Don't let us have any mysteries between us, my dear!"

Lady Wickens smiled. "It would be a little late to *start* that . . . No, there's nothing mysterious about it. It's simply that if Tom doesn't come back here we shall lose the others too."

"Nonsense!" said Sir Thomas. "I don't believe it. That's nothing but high-handed theatricalism,

just like Dick's talk of going to make a row at the War Office."

Lady Wickens shook her head. "Don't dismiss it like that! Madge has been terribly restless since she got home, and as for Dick, I hardly feel that I know him any more. He has lost all his good humor and sense of fun. The war seems to have shut him up inside himself, to have hurt him in some way that you and I don't know anything about."

Sir Thomas grunted. "It's made him infernally rude, if that's what you mean!"

"To me it isn't rudeness, dear. It goes deeper than that." Lady Wickens sighed. "Then, too, he *did* go to the War Office, the day after he got home."

Sir Thomas sat up. "He did? Why didn't you tell me? What happened?"

"I don't know what happened," said Lady Wickens. "He saw some officer there and was told that Tom and the others might be released any day."

"Oh!" Sir Thomas left his chair abruptly and, with hands folded behind his back, began walking up and down the room. "There has been nothing about it in the papers. I've been watching for it. Nor have I heard any gossip in the city. How many days is it since this took place?"

"It's a fortnight since Dick came home," said Lady Wickens.

"That means thirteen days since the War Office gave him that information . . . H'm! Perhaps they just told him that to get rid of him. Did he tell you whom he saw?"

"No," said Lady Wickens, "but he seemed so confident that ever since I've been half expecting

that every ring at the doorbell may be Tom." A note of appeal came into her voice. "Have you been thinking it over, dear? Don't you think your position is secure enough for you to be able to disregard what people say? I simply can't bring myself to . . . "

"For heaven's sake," snapped Sir Thomas, "don't let us go all over it again! The whole business is painful enough without its being hashed and rehashed! I don't see any other way out of it!" He crossed to the mantelpiece and pushed the bell button. "Incidentally, I don't quite like your implication that I'm only taking this stand because of what people will say. I hardly expected that from you! I dare say it seems insignificant that my whole life's work is jeopardized because this unfortunate boy saw fit to give expression to opinions of such disloyalty that he had to be convicted, so utterly in opposition to all that I have believed and worked for all my life that I was amazed that he could possibly be my son! He has . . . "

There was a quiet tap at the door and the butler came in.

Sir Thomas broke off. "Oh, Benham," he said, "just tell Mr. Richard to come here, please."

"Captain Richard? Very good, Sir Thomas!" said Benham, and disappeared again.

Sir Thomas continued his nervous march up and down the room, his hands clasping and unclasping behind him. "Preposterous!" he said. "The whole thing's preposterous! Here have I been slaving all my life. I've let you send them all to expensive public schools and later to the most expensive colleges at Oxford. I gave the boys the

chance of coming into the firm, hoping that they might carry on the name there after I retire. Do you think that means anything to them? Do you think I, or my ambitions, matter to them, to any of them?" He laughed shortly. "Did Tom think of my feelings, or of the harm he might do me when he came out and poured sarcasm upon all the ideals for which this country went to war? If that's all Oxford could do for him, I don't think much of it! What did he care that I had always given him the best there was? Or Madge, who thinks that I am beneath contempt and throws my K.B.E. in my face? Or Dick, who comes home and insults me at my own dinner table? . . . And now because I dare stand on my two feet to protect myself in the only possible way from a public disgrace of which Tom is the cause, you all band together to call me hard names, you move secretly behind my back to get that boy released, you . . . "

Again he was interrupted.

This time it was Dick who opened the door and came in.

Benham had given the message just as Madge wound up, "It's no good chewing the rag all night. Let's play pills!"

"You want me, Gov'nor?" queried Dick, and then, after a glance at the expressions on the faces of his mother and father, "Anything up?"

Sir Thomas waved an impatient hand. "What did they tell you at the War Office the other day?"

Dick raised his eyebrows. "Oh," he said, "I see . . . They told me that they expected the conchies to be released almost at once. Have any ripples reached you?"

Sir Thomas ignored the question. "Who gave you that information?"

Dick hesitated. "A Major General of sorts."

"What was his name?"

Dick shrugged his shoulders. His father might as well know now as later, and it might help to clear the air. "Buffen-Owen," he said.

Sir Thomas stopped dead. "Buffen-Owen!" he exclaimed. "My God, that loose-mouthed old fool!"

"He seemed rather a crony of yours!" said Dick.

"What do you mean?"

"He associated the name with you and asked me if I were any relation. When I told him I was . . ."

"Oh, you told him that, did you? You told *him* that!" Sir Thomas almost barked. "It'll be all over the place now that I sent you up to see if something could n't be done! The thing will be blabbed in the club and twisted different ways until it becomes positively malignant! The scurrilous little sheets will get hold of it and they'll try and pull me down! I congratulate you on a good day's work! If you'd deliberately set out to do me harm you could n't have found a better way!" He flung round on his wife. "That's gratitude for you! That's loyalty! And after I'd explained the reasons why my hands were tied! I might as well give up!"

There was a note of hysteria in his father's voice that brought the word shellshock to Dick's mind,—not the kind that got a man suddenly and left him weeping and gibbering, but the peculiar preliminary shrillness, the flying off the handle at some tiny annoyance, that came like a warning after long strain.

Without stopping to analyze it at the moment, he acted on the assumption that it really was that. "Look here, Gov'nor," he said quietly, "let's go into this. I'm afraid the Mater must have given you a wrong impression of what happened at the War Office. It isn't her fault, because I didn't tell her what happened. I merely gave her the final verdict. When I tell you about it, I think you'll see that you've been rather jumping to conclusions."

In full detail he described the Major General's attitude, the things he had replied to the old man's questions, and the fact that he had been dismissed and was considering writing to his Colonel before Sir Thomas had been brought into it at all.

"The reason I didn't deny our relationship—although I thought of doing so—was because I realized that if he took the trouble to look up Tom's papers he would find out that I had lied and the whole thing would look very fishy. But when I said that you were my father, he became extraordinarily genial and began handing you compliments one after another. He said what an able man you were, and how brilliantly you had handled his affairs, and what great friends you were at the club. Finally, when he had told me about the amnesty—only because of you—he wound up by asking me to tell you that if it didn't come through, you could rely on him to do everything that lay in his power to get Tom out." Dick's voice became reassurance itself. "Now as I see it, Gov'nor, there's absolutely no reason to be panicked about that old bird. It's already ten or twelve days since I saw him and nothing has come back to you. What's more, he's far too keen on your continuing to handle his affairs to think of

making trouble. Also it's far more likely that the government will just turn the conchies loose. They can't be bothered with them any more, and therefore you certainly can't be connected with any attempt to get Tom freed. Honest to God, I think you're worrying about nothing, Gov'nor!"

"Nothing!" echoed Sir Thomas. "I suppose it *is* nothing to you!"

"Well, won't you tell me what else it is?" asked Dick. "I might be able to help."

Sir Thomas laughed bitterly. A lot of sympathy he would get from any of them if he confessed the dread that possessed him.

In so many words it was that his K.B.E. would be taken away from him; but it was so bound up with other things, so interwoven with his whole psychology, that it would be unfair to state it so baldly. It went right back to his early complex about the rainy day, his lonely little struggles to emerge from himself and cease to be "odd man out." All his life he had fallen short of his own desires, of his own dreams of what should be. He had seen himself eternally on the other side of the fence, unable to make himself wanted, full of fears that were shared by no one else. When the war came he had found himself part of a common emotion, for the first time in his life one with the crowd, feeling as they did, thinking and living as they did, geared in to the common pulse. More than that, he had been able to do something that the crowd as such could not do, to push his head and shoulders a little above the rest and accomplish something definite for his country. The K.B.E.—and he had not pulled the least wire to get it—was more than a public recog-

nition of that fact. It was a source of spiritual strength, a promotion, significant of personal merit, that carried with it a daily, almost hourly, comfort and satisfaction.

It was curious that he did not count his business achievements, derived no benefit from the one outstanding talent that was his. He dismissed that from the equation. It was merely his job, the thing that he had gone on plugging at all his days, with, it seemed to him, the inevitable result, — the mere accumulation of much money. The K.B.E. was something infinitely above and beyond that. It lifted him from the ruck of nonentities and nincompoops, gave him a standing with himself. It represented the missing factor for which he had been starved so long. The fact that K.B.E.'s were numerous didn't mar his inner satisfaction. *His* K.B.E. was an entirely individual one, like the ray of sunshine, a matter of no moment to the man in the street, which creeps through the slit of a cell and keeps a prisoner sane.

How could he tell Dick that, when he couldn't define it himself but was intensely conscious of it only through his emotions? How could he reply that he was really engaged in a struggle for self-preservation and that it was the fear of being plunged back into the limbo, if his title was taken away from him, which made him thrust away the approaching danger?

As he saw it, the danger was Tom. The fact that Tom was his son only made it doubly acute: it was certainly no reason why he shouldn't kick him out. Apart from the mere fact of relationship, they were, to all intents and purposes, strangers. In thought,

habit and point of view, they had nothing in common. Indeed, more than that, they were actively opposed, and the war had merely been the instrument in bringing that opposition to a head. The words father and son were merely sentimental labels at the best of times, and in this case an added source of danger. The fact that he was the boy's father might be used against him, — with what unconscious irony seeing that they had never felt any of the traditional affection that that relationship implied!

The panic that he had felt at the mention of Buffen-Owen was partially dissipated by Dick's quiet account of the interview. Perhaps the not very subtle flattery of the latter half of it was not without its effect. But at best it was only the averting of an immediate possibility of trouble. The road ahead was none the clearer.

He swung round on Dick. "If you want to help," he said, "there's one way you can do so. That is by letting me work this out in my own way. You can take my word for it when I say that I know it will be best for both your brother and myself if he does not return to this house. Nor do I propose to be bullied for any further reasons for this decision. You can take it or leave it. Meanwhile, you may be interested to know that I am now going up to my study to write Tom a letter, telling him that he must make his own arrangements in future."

Lady Wickens, hitherto a silent, nervous audience for her husband and son, leaned forward suddenly as though she had heard something outside.

The others apparently were unaware of it. Sir Thomas went across to the door and had his hand on the latch when Dick broke in.

"I think you 're making a grave mistake, Gov'nor! For goodness' sake, don't write that letter! At least wait till he gets back and has been able to take half a dozen breaths outside that ghastly barbed wire! Give the poor devil a chance to feel free again!"

Sir Thomas shook his head. "I don't see what difference that would make."

"It would make all the difference," said Dick, "not only to him but to yourself!"

Sir Thomas shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, look here," said Dick, "if you insist on writing it, will you at least let me take him the letter? I'll catch to-morrow morning's boat and by two o'clock in the afternoon I can be at the camp. I don't think you 'll regret it if you let me do that! There's something so desperately cold-blooded about posting a bomb like that!"

"I think you exaggerate!" said Sir Thomas.

Dick was about to continue when the sound of heavy boots coming up the front steps held them all silent. Some one fumbled with the front door knob.

Lady Wickens stood up. "Dick!" she said.

"My God!" whispered Dick. "Do you suppose—" He laughed excitedly. "Oh, no, it's absurd!"

As the front door creaked and the steps sounded in the hall, Sir Thomas pulled open the drawing-room door. "Who 's there?" he challenged.

He found himself looking into the eyes of his son.

Lady Wickens and Dick could n't see out. Sir Thomas blocked the doorway. But they heard a chuckle in the hall and a well-remembered voice say, "Hullo, Gov'nor! How are you?"

"Tom!" cried Lady Wickens on her way to the door.

Sir Thomas barred it with his arm. "Wait!" he said.

The chuckle came again. "Yes, I don't think you'd better come too near, Mater dear! I'm none too savory. I need about four baths to make me—" His voice broke off. He made a choking sound, his knees sagged, and he crumpled up on to the floor like a half-empty sack.

Lady Wickens gave a cry, wrenched away her husband's arm and ran to Tom.

In two strides Dick joined her. He took one look at Tom's chalky face. "Christ!" he said. "They've starved him to death!" He swung round on his father. "Now kick him out! Go on, let's hear you sing the national anthem and kick him out!"

The queer limpness of that body on the floor seemed to be doing strange things to Sir Thomas. He remained staring down at it, white, silent, afraid to ask the question that flicked into his mind, a question that expressed the shadow of a desire that he refused to admit.

He moistened his dry lips. "Is he—is he dead?"

"No," said Dick, "but God knows how near he is to it. Look out, Mater! Let me get at him. You go and tell Madge to 'phone the doctor while I carry him upstairs! Incidentally it might be a good scheme to rout out Edwards and tell him to go and fetch the doctor in the car. It'll save time."

"Are you sure you can carry him by yourself?" Lady Wickens rose to her feet. "Let Benham help you!"

"That's all right, Mater! You get Madge on

the job!" Dick went down on one knee beside his brother, heaved him up till he had a shoulder under him, and rose to his feet. Steadying himself with one hand on the banister, he carried Tom slowly upstairs.

Lady Wickens hurried down to get Madge.

Sir Thomas was left standing in the doorway, ineffectual, impotent, shaken by this new revelation of himself.

Chapter Eleven

By the time the doctor came, Dick had undressed Tom and put him to bed. He lay there with his eyes closed, utterly limp, as though only half conscious. Lady Wickens fluttered about the room, filling it with anxious lamentations. From time to time Dick cursed softly to himself. He turned his back on his mother and stared out of window.

Madge, thoroughly professional, assured herself that Tom was lying comfortably and then, holding her breath, gathered his clothes into a bundle, rolled them in several thicknesses of newspaper and disappeared downstairs, calling loudly for Wilson to bring her matches and lots of kerosene.

Then the doctor was brought up. Gently but firmly he got Lady Wickens out of the room and proceeded to examine Tom. As the only medical man in the village, he had known the family, more or less, for years. That is to say, when they passed one another driving or on foot, they exchanged the customary, "How d' y' do?" and "Lovely day!", —the basic structure of English society. About once in six months he was invited to dinner at the house. Sometimes he accepted. At other times he refused. His practice was à large and straggling one among the workers in the brick and cabbage fields, and to get to them in times of need he drove himself round in a high gig. To him cars were still newfangled things. He preferred a horse: it was

safer. That at least was what he said. Perhaps it was the Irish of him.

Presently he folded back into their case the instruments with which he had been listening to Tom's heart and lungs, and glanced up at Dick. "Nothing organic," he said. "Call it an advanced case of malnutrition and severe physical strain. I should say that he 'd been living on nothing more solid than will power for quite some time . . . Of course, I 'm not saying that that is n't the solidest thing there is, but it 's a mistake to overdo anything."

"You think he 'll pull out all right?" queried Dick.

The doctor smiled. "I wish I had that boy's constitution! . . . Just back from a German prison camp, I suppose?"

"No," said Dick. "An English one."

The doctor repeated it incredulously.

Dick explained. "The conchy camp outside Boulogne."

"Ah!" said the doctor. He looked down at Tom again. "I do remember hearing something of it at the time . . . And yet I've always heard it boasted that we were the only people who never committed any atrocities. One should never believe what one hears, should one?"

Dick laughed. "Did you see anything of the show, Doctor?"

"A great deal — from the outside!" There was a twinkle in the doctor's eyes. "History shows that when a man reaches the sere and yellow, it is customary to resign from the sphere of action in favor of the younger men, — especially when that action is as peculiarly dangerous to life and limb as war. It seemed to me that London amply proved

the hypothesis. You may have had occasion to make the same observation in France! I myself subscribed to the historic formula because in my palmier days I allowed a misguided enthusiasm to carry me to the lengths of joining up in the South African campaign. Of course, the whole affair was a side show in comparison to any one of the raids that you saw, but it was sufficient to prove to me that the word glory in conjunction with an unlimited number of corpses is a tragic misnomer. Since then, like a good cobbler, I have stuck to my last!"

Dick nodded. "I rather think that you'll find a good many of us trying to do that from now on, even though the penalty is a barbed-wire cage."

"Do you think so?" queried the doctor. "I doubt it! The average man is not so sure of his definitions as your brother. I am afraid there will be no lack of recruits in the next war."

"You haven't much faith in this war-to-end-war stuff?" said Dick.

The doctor smiled. "Out in the East," he said, "the natives thump a tom-tom to work themselves into fighting frenzy. That war-to-end-war 'thumped' just as well! . . . I should like to see your mother before I go. She will need a diet sheet. And as far as nursing is concerned, that very capable young sister of yours can do all that is necessary. *She* learned something useful out there!" He gathered up his case of instruments.

"Right!" said Dick. "I'll take you down."

They found Lady Wickens and Madge in the drawing-room. Lady Wickens had many questions to ask. When the doctor had answered them all and finally convinced her that Tom was in need of

only three things to be perfectly well again — time, bed, and the right kind of food — he gave Madge the necessary instructions and went off, promising to come back in two or three days, more, as he said with a smile, because he would enjoy having a chat with Tom than because he was worried as to his health.

"I like that fellow!" said Dick, as he closed the front door after his departure and came back into the room again. "He's damn sound! Funny to think that one has grown up here and never realized what a decent chap we had in our midst!" He laughed.

"We were all far too healthy young animals," said Madge, "for him ever to come under our personal observation."

"As soon as Tom's on his feet again, I vote we try and persuade him to come up to dinner," said Dick. "He let fly a couple of corkers about the war! I should be enormously interested to hear him really talk about it."

Lady Wickens put her hand on his arm. "My dear boy," she said, "there are one or two things more important than that to be settled first. In the first place, were you really satisfied with his opinion about Tom?"

"Absolutely!" said Dick.

"You don't think . . ."

Madge interrupted. "Now, Mater, I think *I've* learned a thing or two about doctors and their little ways, and from this one's attitude I'm willing to bet that Tom is as safe as houses!"

"There you are!" said Dick. "There's an expert opinion for you, Mater!"

Lady Wickens lowered her voice. "All right," she said, "I promise not to worry about that, not more than I can help. But suppose your father won't allow him to stay? That's the thing that's on my mind!"

Dick whistled. "I'd forgotten all about that!"

"Don't cross your bridges, Mater!" said Madge. "There can't be any chucking out till Tom is on his feet again. I don't believe the doctor would allow it, for one thing, and after all, the Gov'nor isn't vindictive!"

"H'm!" said Dick. "Depends what you mean by it!"

Lady Wickens shook her head. "Not in any sense of the word!"

"Well, what *is* behind all that stuff he was telling us to-night? Do you know what it reminded me of, Mater? A man on the verge of shell-shock!"

Lady Wickens looked at Dick bewilderedly. "Shellshock?" She had read of it in the papers and in a vague sort of way the phrase conjured up frightful things. "Good heavens!"

"I mean by that," said Dick, "that he sounded as if his nerve was on the point of cracking. All that stuff about being hammered is perfect nonsense! People aren't as insane as that. He's got a bad attack of wind up about something that doesn't exist, except in his own mind!"

Lady Wickens was left floundering. "I only know," she said, "that he has given every waking minute to the war ever since it began. I used to beg him to take a holiday, even if it was only a few days at a time, but he always said that it was impossible,

that he couldn't be spared, and that in any case it was no time to take a holiday. This dreadful idea of not letting Tom return was never mentioned until after Madge came home."

Madge laughed. "I suppose I was such a white elephant that he decided he couldn't do with two about the place!"

"Well, look here, Mater," said Dick, "why don't you get him to go off with you to the Riviera or somewhere? It's time he had a change; and Madge and I will hang on and look after Tom. If you could get him to do that, it might make all the difference. Don't you think so?"

"Heaven knows whether he'd come!" said Lady Wickens. "But I do think it's a good idea, so good that I'd be willing to leave Tom with you."

"Then let's hunt him up and all three of us urge him to go," said Madge. "The moral weight of three to one should be overwhelming!"

"Incidentally, where is he?" said Dick. "It's too early for him to have gone up to bed."

Lady Wickens protested. "I don't think we ought to discuss it to-night!"

"No time like the present!" said Dick. "And the surprise of Tom's being actually in the house may just turn the trick. Don't you think so, Madge?"

"On the principle of striking while the enemy's unprepared, eh?" Madge laughed. "Lord knows whether it'll work, but I think it's worth a try, because at least he won't have had time to make any plan of his own. Why don't we ring for Benham and see whether he's gone to roost?"

Dick pushed the bell. "What's more, a whisky

and soda would n't go so badly at this moment! Does n't Benham usually function about now?"

He tossed a cigarette to Madge, helped himself, and struck a match for them both.

"And don't let's forget," said Lady Wickens, "that we've got to wake Tom and feed him tonight!"

Madge glanced at the clock. "I told them downstairs when the doctor left. They ought to have the soup nearly ready by now. I'll ask Benham."

At that moment the butler tapped at the door and came in. He was carrying a tray of glasses which surrounded a bottle of whisky and a siphon.

"You rang, my lady?" he asked.

Madge took the word. "Yes," she said. "Has Cook got that soup ready?"

"Not quite, Miss Madge," said Benham. He put the tray down on the small table near the armchair that Sir Thomas occupied. "But it won't be more than a few minutes. Would you like me to bring it to you here when it is ready?"

"Will you? Thanks!" said Madge. She looked across at her mother.

Lady Wickens caught her cue. "Oh, and Benham," she said, "will you go up and see if Sir Thomas has gone to bed? If he has not, please ask him to come downstairs."

Benham was standing to attention halfway to the door. "Begging your pardon, my lady," he said, "but Sir Thomas has gone up to town."

Dick looked up from pouring out the whisky. "Gone up to *town!* . . . When did he go?"

"While you were upstairs with the doctor, sir," said Benham. "I packed a small suitcase and

Edwards drove Sir Thomas to the ten-eighteen. He was going to the club, sir."

For a moment there was a dead silence.

Then Lady Wickens, in a rather trembling voice, said, "Thank you, Benham!"

No one said anything more till the door closed gently behind the butler.

Then Madge sat down on the back of the sofa. "Which is tantamount to saying, I suppose, 'You can all go to hell in your own sweet way!' . . . We may be said to have underrated the enemy! Or are we to congratulate ourselves on a little breathing space? It saves you the bother of going to the Riviera, Mater, anyway!"

Dick glanced at his mother, and said quickly, "Shut up, Madge! You don't understand." Then he went across to his mother, who was fighting hard to keep back her tears.

"Buck up, Mater!" he said. "It is n't as bad as all that! And besides if — if it 's really going to smash things up between you and the Gov'nor, there 's not the slightest danger in shifting Tom to a hospital in the morning. Would you rather do that?"

As he looked down at her worried face beneath the neatly piled gray hair it came to him with a sense of shock that what had seemed hitherto a perfectly simple argument between his father and himself had become suddenly complicated with entirely new issues. He stood appalled. How infinitely much simpler it was to stroll through a barrage than to get tangled up in emotions and sentimental situations!

Lady Wickens rose to her feet. "I think they 'll

make your father very comfortable at the club," she said, "and meanwhile we must do our best for Tom here!"

Whereupon Madge, who had been puffing her cigarette until it was red hot, hurled the rest of it into the fire and cried, "Great work, Mater! That's the stuff to feed the troops!"

Dick nodded and sat down in his father's armchair, as Benham entered with another tray. "The soup, Miss Madge!" he announced.

Chapter Twelve

THE day after Tom arrived Madge walked down to the post-office, — the place of the bottle-glass windows and jars of sticky sweets. She carried several letters in her hand. On the way through the village she became vaguely conscious that there was a tinge of reserve behind the usually friendly nods and greetings which she exchanged with the cottagers.

She was, indeed, hardly aware of it until one woman deliberately turned her back and walked into her cottage, closing the door.

"That's odd!" thought Madge.

The post-office, at the corner of the green, was also at the crossroads through which all traffic passed. It was therefore the lounging place, the gossip exchange, and slightly more popular than the Middlesex Arms at the other side of the green because both sexes might rendezvous at the post-office, while only one was permissible at the public house.

As Madge approached the little knot of men and girls only the two ex-soldiers called out, "Good evening, Miss!" The rest fell silent as she passed, nodding, or touching their forelocks with obvious sulkiness.

The old lady behind the counter, her face wrinkled like a dried apple, cried, "Good evening, Miss Madge!" in the manner of an old friend. She had been there for years before Madge was born.

"Your brother's back. I hear, and sick!" she added, shaking her head in what was intended for a gesture of sympathy.

"Is *that* why everybody looks at me as if I were a case of influenza?" asked Madge.

The lady peered at her over her glasses. "Ah!" she said, "so you've noticed that, have you? Well, my dear, don't take it to 'eart. They'll have something else to talk about in a day or two. That Fred Hawkins is up again for poaching and they do say that he hurt the keeper in getting away. That will end Mr. Tom as a subject of conversation!"

Madge lifted the lid from one of the jars of sweets and helped herself, a privilege enjoyed since the days of plaits. "How do they feel about Tom, Mrs. Sheldon?" she asked.

Mrs. Sheldon shrugged her shoulders. "Some of 'em have been saying hard things!" she said. "You see, my dear, there's a many as has lost sons and husbands round the village, and it's hard for them to understand that now the war's over things are going on again as if nothing had happened. According to them, Mr. Tom hadn't no right to come back!"

Madge nodded. "I know that feeling!" she said. "As it was, he nearly didn't come back!" she added. "They almost starved the life out of him."

"Gracious sakes!" cried Mrs. Sheldon. "It'll be a comfort to them to know that!"

Madge burst out laughing. "That's a pretty fundamental comment, Mrs. Sheldon! . . . Will you give me a couple of books of stamps?"

The old lady bent over a drawer and, after some

unsuccessful groping, produced the stamps. "Shall I put them down, Miss Madge?"

"Yes, please," said Madge. "Good night, Mrs. Sheldon. See you again in a day or two."

"Good night, Miss Madge, thank you! . . . When is Sir Thomas coming back again?"

Madge was almost at the door when the question reached her. "Good Lord!" she said over her shoulder. "They don't miss much, do they?"

"Well," said Mrs. Sheldon, "it did look kind of funny, his going off the same night Mr. Tom come back!"

Madge laughed. "Oh, he'll be back in a day or two, I expect," she said. "He had to go up on some special business . . . Good night!"

The little bell attached to the door tinkled violently as she shut the door behind her, glad to avoid committing herself further. It was like emerging from an inquisition. The speed and accuracy with which the village could put two and two together was incredible.

She found herself once more in the little knot of men and girls, some of whom she had observed staring at her through the windows of the shop.

The word "conchy" was flung from one to another in an audible murmur.

Madge started to sail through them with her chin stuck out, when the voice of the wounded soldier with the cork leg broke in.

"'Ere! Less of it!" he said.

Inwardly Madge gloated. Here was the proof of what she had told her father across the breakfast table. Of course this "common soldier" and she saw eye to eye. He would have been with her at

that moment, even if she had not happened to nurse him, simply because he knew that she had "been through it."

He detached himself from the group, touched his cap in a half salute and limped up, planting himself squarely in her way. "'Evening, Miss!" he said.

"Well, Brown," said Madge, and the crowd grew silent to listen, "have any of the patriots round here found you a job yet?"

Brown laughed—once. "No, Miss," he said, "and I doubt if they'll find me a blinkin' corfin when I've rotted to death!"

"Well, as I told you the other day," said Madge, "we've got room for an extra hand in the garden. When you're ready, come on up to the house."

Brown slanted his head. "You're all right!" he said. "I won't forget that, Miss, but I'm still trying to get back to my trade. They keep on tellin' me at the brick yards they're full up, and expect me to believe it!"

"Oh," said Madge. "It's like that, eh? I'll drive over to-morrow with my brother and see if we can't wangle something."

"Thank you, Miss!" said Brown. "Begging your pardon, Miss, I wanted to ask you about 'im."

"Who? The Captain?"

"No," said Brown, "the conchy."

A snicker or two came from the group.

A touch of stiffness crept into Madge's voice. "What about him?" she asked.

"There's one or two questions I'd like to ask him," said Brown, "and I reckon he can answer them. You see, Miss, I've found out that all this 'ero business is a blinkin' washout! If I'd 'a' known

in '14 what I know now, I would n't 'a' been so free with my legs for King and Country. Fat lot they care that I left one of 'em be'ind as a soovenir! For all the use they got for me now, I might as well 'ave stopped the whole blinkin' shell instead of only just a splinter. Your brother 'ad the right idea, I should n't be surprised, and I 'd like to come and ask about it when 'e 's well enough. They did n't fool 'im!"

It was with something of the same amazement that Sir Thomas listened to Dick that Madge received this pronouncement from Brown. She had supposed that he, without a job and with only one leg, would despise Tom more intelligently and thoroughly than the rest of the villagers. She hardly knew what to reply. "Of course," she said, "I know that we can't expect gratitude, but—"

"Gratitude!" Brown took the word from her mouth and underlined it with contempt. He looked round at the listening group. Then he spat. "Look at them!" he said to Madge.

A laugh or two went up. Apparently it was n't the first time that Brown had given expression to his bewildered stumbling after a truth apparently endowed with special qualities of relativity.

"Bill 's off again!" muttered one girl, and snickered.

"Change the record!" came a man's voice. "You 're a civvy yourself now!"

Brown swung round on him, but before he could say something appropriate another voice said, "Oh, fergit it! Come on over and 'ave a pint at the Arms!"

His eyes blazing, Brown hobbled towards the man

who had called him a civilian. "I'm a civvy, am I? . . . You blinkin', lousy . . . "

"Here, just a minute, Brown!" Madge raised her voice. "Wait till I'm out of range, please!" She picked her way through them and walked along, followed, after a brief pause, by the beginnings of Brown's heated answer.

She was desperately sorry for Brown. It seemed to her that he was like a one-legged rat in a trap, bristling and spitting with unquenchable courage at the dogs barking at him outside. Her thoughts went back to the sight of his face in the hospital as he first looked down at the stump where his other leg should have been. And there had been so many Browns during the four years!

A new picture suddenly framed itself in her mind, a picture in whose background there was, vaguely, something of Dick. It made her give a little hiss through her teeth.

"I wonder," she thought, "if every village in England is full of them, full of cripples who are beginning to regret that they ever fought?"

Chapter Thirteen

For forty-eight hours the family sat back on tenterhooks and waited, while Tom was roused sufficiently to be fed at stated intervals and immediately after relapsed into deep, uneasy sleep.

They took turns in watching him by day, and at night Dick unfolded his camp bed and slept in the same room. Of itself this was, perhaps, a quite insignificant act, to be expected of any brother. In this particular case, however, it was quite otherwise. It was a proof of a spiritual change in Dick — what Madge called "bringing back a conscience in full working order" — for whereas in pre-war days it would never have entered his head to do such a thing, and, if requested to do it, he would have answered, "Good Lord, what on earth for?" with a strong self-conscious resistance, on the night of Tom's return he had fetched his bed without a word and announced his intention of sleeping there.

It was on the afternoon of the third day when Dick, smoking and reading in front of the fire in Tom's room after tea, glanced up from his page to find Tom looking steadily at him. It was a moment that he had been anticipating with very mixed feelings.

Apart from the amazing diversity of their experience in the war, the direct outcome of two entirely different lines of thinking, there was nothing in their lives from the time they went up to Oxford that gave

them the key to each other. Tom's friends had peopled the Union and filled the pages of the various Oxford magazines, running the gamut of the "isms" from Conservatism to Fabianism; while Dick's, at the price of much sweat, reaped a harvest of Blues and dismissed as "blither" the sonnets and satires of the "long-haired brigade" whose rooms they periodically wrecked in the sincere belief that they were upholding the traditions of their colleges.

From the secure vantage ground of a magnificent physique, Dick looked upon Tom's "isms" with the good-natured condescension of a Newfoundland dog for the yappings of a terrier pup. Tom, on the other hand, while admitting that Dick's frame was sculpturally perfect, deplored the fact that in the matter of cerebellum he was, quite naturally, woefully imperfect.

Neither of them knew that each had a sneaking admiration for the other's achievements: that when Dick dropped his man for the count in the second round at Cambridge, Tom was heard to murmur something about his brother's perfection of rhythm; while on reading of Tom's first-class honors in Greats, Dick nodded thoughtfully and said, "Brainy beggar!"

In the manner of most brothers they left it at that and went their separate ways.

What they would find in each other now neither of them knew, but both, for entirely different reasons, felt that the going was a little difficult,—Tom, because he had made up his mind that Dick would be superior and slightly patronizing; and Dick, because he had seen his brother flat on his face, which meant that the poor devil must have

been stretched beyond the limits of endurance. He had the uncomfortable feeling that he, as a soldier, must represent the blind brutalities which had reduced Tom to extremities. He felt that he owed Tom an apology, but that if he attempted it he would only label himself a well-meaning ass.

Then, too, it seemed to him that Tom's eye might have been anybody's eye, its expression was so utterly without recognition.

He cleared his throat, swung one leg over the other, and said with a tremendous heartiness that was the outcome of nerves, "Hullo, old thing! How's it coming along?"

For a moment Tom didn't answer. Then he said abruptly, "Light me one of those cigarettes, will you?"

While Dick took out his cigarette case and lit a cigarette from his own, Tom's eyes were like gimlets boring holes into him.

With the smoke swirling behind him, Dick went over and held out the cigarette to his brother. The gruffness of Tom's command—it amounted to that—was like a bucket of cold water in his face, but at the sight of the thin, shaky hand and arm that reached up for the cigarette, he felt his stomach turn within him.

"Do you feel a bit better, old man?" he said.

Tom kept his eyes on the cigarette. "I'm all right!" he grunted.

Dick sat down on the side of the bed. "Oh, Christ!" he said. "Those swine must have given you a perfectly hellish time! I'd like to go and shoot that bloody C.O. of yours!"

Weak as a kitten, Tom had been mustering what

strength he had in anticipation of Dick's army attitude, in keeping with his first remark. But in face of the low-voiced intensity of Dick's sympathy, and the utter surprise of it, his defenses crumpled up.

The accumulation of nearly three years' degradation, both mental and physical, was festering inside him, — the continual insults of officers who derived a sadistic pleasure in taking it out of them; the foul-mouthed bullying of moron-minded N.C.O's and men who knew that the officers would wink at anything they did to the "bloody conchies" in the sacred cause of patriotism; and above all the strange feeling of pressure that grew tighter and tighter as the isolation of soul and body went on month after month, year after year, an isolation that became a terror. Not only were the hands of all men against them, but they were aliens among their kind, their time and their civilization, forced to the repression of every human instinct, more cut off in thought and feeling from their fellows than lepers, who at least knew pity.

It was like standing stark, defenseless and alone in some weird world of cataclysm. Each minute of every day — and especially of every night, until sleep mercifully put an end to consciousness — gnawed at the foundations of their courage and, in their incredible loneliness and inactivity, the immensity of effort required to build it up again was the hardest thing of all, a ceaseless and relentless struggle.

In jerks and in rushes Tom told it all, draining some of the poison out of him; swinging from a dispassionate arraignment of the system, which was almost primal in its cruelty, to a shaken and emo-

tional torrent as he described its effects upon some stricken individual, — as, for instance, when he told how the pressure had finally driven two of them insane.

Dick was the kind who had thoughtlessly been half-contemptuous of, half-hostile to, the men who didn't come out till they were conscripted. He had sometimes gone out of his way to "ride them", to find them dirty jobs, dangerous jobs, because they had been sitting back safely all the time while the decent fellows had been taking it in the neck. Their mere presence had stirred up an active feeling of resentment, — a resentment never felt towards the "conchy": he was too far away, too shadowy a being, something one had never met. Like the rest of his class, Dick had carelessly dismissed conscientious objectors from his consideration, not bothered to analyze them, either individually or as a group. They were just a lot of slackers, rotters, dirty dogs, unwashed socialists, and it served 'em right to be rounded up. They represented a phenomenon that he didn't understand and hadn't ever tried to. To him Tom's being one of them was a sort of temporary accident. So it was with something of a shock that he heard that Tom was not the only "civilized person" there. The bulk of them, as he had expected, were semi-literate working men, fiercely radical, or religious to the point of fanaticism; but, to his vast surprise, Tom told him that they numbered among them an athlete who had represented his country internationally, a preacher of whom Dick had heard vaguely, an author whose name was a household word among the readers of serious novels, an Oxford don who had been a lec-

turer in economics, several professional men, and many others who had been quietly earning their living in London offices until the war had swept them off their stools.

Their philosophies were many and varied; they argued bitterly and divided off into factions in their prison huts, but they shared a common conviction against war which made them stand shoulder to shoulder and endure such infamies of misunderstanding, abuse and hatred as were hurled against the enemy by the average noncombatant of both sides.

Dick's own experience made Tom's description of the camp hardly necessary, — a line of stark wooden huts on a bare space of ground, baked brown in summer, oozing with sticky mud in winter, never without that indescribable smell of chloride of lime and latrines that seemed to get into the blankets and permeate the food; everywhere a brutal cleanliness carried to the point of vice; and around it all a high stockade of barbed wire with a sentry at the only possible exit.

There was something symbolic about that wire. Just as the gun, the tank or the wings on the cap of a man in khaki denoted his particular training in the art of war, so that wire announced to the world at large that the men inside it were cowards, "conchies", — the terms were synonymous. That thin, transparent barrier, unbreakable, unscalable, and yet invisible in certain lights, was like the intangible barrier of belief that cut them off from their fellows, prevented their sharing the same line of conduct.

"Whenever we were inspected," said Tom, "we had to fall in and stand to attention and the Colonel

would wave his hand and say, 'Here are my bloody cowards! What do you think of 'em?' . . . There was a man called Archbut who got the Albert Medal for jumping off Westminster Bridge and saving a woman from drowning. He was one of the 'bloody cowards.' There was another chap, a thin anæmic devil who had been a schoolmaster in a country board school. For some reason the sergeant was always picking on him,—because he had a craze for keeping his hands clean, I believe. One evening in the hut at lights out the sergeant went a bit too far. He made a perfectly filthy remark about the girl the fellow was engaged to. The little schoolmaster got up off his cot and went for him. The sergeant was a heavyweight and knocked the poor devil flat a couple of times but the 'coward' came back like a tiger while we all sat up and cheered, and finally he pounded that sergeant senseless. Then the poor little devil put his hands over his face and burst into tears. He went mad eventually."

As Tom went on relating the fantastic routine of that prison camp, Dick was undergoing something akin to a mental revolution.

Except by implication, he kept himself out of the picture almost entirely; but, finally, he came to a pause with a phrase that was a confession of how far he had dived below the superficial differences between them.

"If it had gone on another year," he ended, "I think it would have got me, Dick!"

The cigarette which Dick had given him had dropped to the floor and gone out. Neither of them had noticed it. Tom was staring at a spot on the opposite wall and beyond it back into the

prison camp. For many moments neither of them spoke.

Dick's hands were twisting and untwisting. The misery and discomfort that he felt were not only for Tom. As a sort of running accompaniment to the story of Tom's experiences, flashes of his own life in France stood out as suddenly different as bits of trench at night illuminated by a star shell. It was as though the truth of certain things only half suspected at the time were now made clear by this outside evidence.

"My God!" he said at last, jumping up; and again, "My God!" after he had paced up and down the room a couple of times. "You . . . you've got the kind of guts that . . . that gives me the gooseflesh merely to think of it! . . . In cold blood like that! But to think that you had to, while we were going through that other terror! What the hell does it all mean? Why do we do it? Why can't we do something about it? Have we just got to go on living as if nothing had ever happened, to pretend for the rest of our lives, to let the thing run along in the same old way like a lot of helpless idiots?" He swung round on his brother. "What do you make of it, Tom? You've studied this thing and I haven't. Is there any answer?"

Once more those eyes drilled into Dick's, but this time there was a light in them of surprise and warm interest. For a moment after his outburst Tom had wished it unsaid, could have bitten his tongue out for giving in and, in obedience to the odd instinctive impulse that seems to work on an automatic hair-trigger, was subconsciously forming self-justifying reasons and excuses for having done it.

Dick's reply checked the process. The need for protective covering would seem to be gone. No pre-war Dick could have had those things in his mind and it seemed to Tom now that the marks of change were in his brother's face and eyes. Tom had not forgotten, would never forget, the low incessant mumble of guns, like a premonition of chaos, that was an overtone to his prison life. That was the force which at the price of a million deaths had quickened Dick, and perhaps a few others . . . A tiny atoll in a vast ocean, so tiny that two or three big waves must submerge it! . . . Tom turned his back on the philosophy of it, eager to find out more about this new Dick, to see how far he had come.

"The answer is more and better wars!" he said. He groped for his cigarette, lit it and inhaled deeply.

"Do you mean that?" asked Dick.

Tom shrugged his shoulders. "How many centuries did it take for a giraffe to grow a neck?"

Dick nodded. "I see!" he said. "Then we are helpless idiots!"

"Oh, no!" said Tom. "That presupposes a lost intelligence, and God knows we've never had that! It's a part of evolution, that's all. No idea ever sprouted in the human mind without being watered in blood,—religion, nationalism, industry, take any field you like! Give us time and we may be quite intelligent yet. What's a few æons more or less?" He gave a laugh and went on. "They gave us plenty of time to hatch out a thought or two in the quarry . . . But tell me, old man, how did you come out of it? Not smashed up at all?"

Dick jerked a shoulder as though to dismiss himself from the discussion altogether. "I? . . .

Oh! . . . No," he said. "My luck held. A couple of scratches, that's all. But the whole damn world seems upside down and I don't know what to make of it. I'd like to chew it over with you when you get fit."

"Rather!" said Tom warmly. "I'm vastly interested to know what the firing line's done to those who survived. Incidentally, I feel nearly human now. I'll be up and out in a couple of days."

"If I were you," said Dick, "I wouldn't hurry it."

"Oh, it's such an infernal waste of time being on one's back," said Tom. "Give me another cigarette, Dick."

Dick passed him his case. "Keep that until I get you a box from downstairs."

"Thanks, old man," said Tom. Their eyes met as he took the case. Neither of them said anything, but both felt that the undergrowth had been cleared, that they had come out into an understanding of each other which they had never known before.

"I wish you'd get hold of the Mater for me. I'd like to see her, and Madge too," said Tom. "The Gov'nor's at the office, I suppose."

Dick nodded.

Tom went on. "By the way, you might give me a line on the Gov'nor. He didn't quite grasp my point of view when I chose the quarry instead of the trenches, and I'm afraid we both uttered some rather bitter things. Has he changed at all?"

Dick replied with a question. "Have you ever heard of the K.B.E.?"

Tom shook his head. "It sounds like one of those army diseases," he said with a smile.

"No," said Dick, "it's a civilian one. It means Knight of the British Empire."

"My God!" exclaimed Tom. "The Gov'nor's been knighted?"

"Umh'm!" said Dick.

"So he's Sir Thomas Wickens, eh?" said Tom thoughtfully.

"And apparently rolling in coin," added Dick.

"It's extraordinary!" said Tom. "As a family we've certainly run the gamut of war possibilities . . . But I'm awfully glad for the Gov'nor. It'll mean an enormous lot to him."

"It does!" said Dick dryly. He hesitated for a moment before going on. Since Sir Thomas' abrupt departure for the club, nothing had been heard of him. It seemed to him that now Tom had turned this decided corner, it was high time to prepare him.

"I've been bumping my head against it," he added, "ever since I got back!"

Tom smiled. "Taking it hard? Tell me!"

"Well," said Dick, "he can hardly be said to want to kill the fatted calf for you!"

"I hadn't fooled myself about that!" said Tom.

Dick leaned on the bed rail. "The trouble is that he's obsessed with the idea that they'll run him out of the Stock Exchange."

"What for?" queried Tom.

Dick spread his hands apologetically. "For having a little conchy in his home!"

Tom jerked himself up on one elbow. "Great God!" he said. "Are we to be outcasts for the rest of our lives?"

"Oh, rot!" said Dick. "That's just the point! I told the Gov'nor that it was all in his head, but

that damned K.B.E. seems to have hypnotized him."

Tom lay down again. Once more he stared up at that spot on the ceiling. Presently he shrugged his shoulders and said quietly, "What did he propose to do about it?"

Dick hesitated. "I hate to tell you," he said. "It doesn't sound like the Gov'nor at all . . . He was going to refuse to have you in the house. Question of his duty to the family, he said, and all that muck! But by way of squaring his conscience — at least I suppose so — he was going to make you a monthly allowance!"

"I see!" said Tom thoughtfully. Then, after a pause, "Why do you put all this in the past tense, Dick?"

In face of his brother's calm reception of the news, Dick took a deep breath of relief. The worst of it was over, anyhow. "Well," he said, with an attempt at lightness, "your dramatic entrance rather gummed the game! You moved out of turn, so to speak, and the result was that as he couldn't hoof you out, he retreated in good order the very night you came and dug himself in at the club, where he has been ever since."

Tom tossed his cigarette into the fire with a hard laugh. "So that's it, is it? They've let us outside the actual barbed wire, but all we've done is to come into the main prison camp, — the whole country! Cheerful prospect, until the hydrophobia dies down! I don't blame the Gov'nor. I think he's dead right. It would be damned awkward for him, especially with a K.B.E., to have me here. But I'll save him the trouble of kicking me out! I only came down

to collect some clothes and to assure the Mater that I was all right."

Dick nodded. "I suppose you're right," he said. "Healthier all round to clear out." He jammed his hands in his pockets and resumed his march up and down the room. "Look here, Tom," he said, "I've been casting round a little and I still think there are pickings to be had in motors. You remember that Jim Hillyard and I set up shop just before the war? They got him, poor old thing, at La Bassée. I've been wondering whether you'd care to come in with me? I think we could make a go of it, don't you?"

For a moment Tom stared at his brother. In face of his father's attitude, this offer came like a bomb. He was torn between the generosity and the folly of it, coming, too, when he was trying to face the prospect of being still a prisoner in another form. He snapped out angrily, "I'm no charity boy!"

Dick's eyes went round in surprise. "What? . . . I don't understand."

Tom shifted uneasily. "I don't know anything about motors!" he said.

Dick cheerfully left the first remark unsolved. He felt on surer ground with this one. "You've got a good bean though!"

He made the comment with such utter disregard of what was in Tom's mind that Tom flung it at his brother in a fury of nervous exasperation. "But, you damned fool, don't you realize that I'm a *conchy?*"

"Oh!" said Dick. "That's all right! I know all about that!"

"You know all about that, do you?" sneered Tom. "Then why the hell do you want to chuck yourself under a steam roller? What's the good of tying a ball and chain round your leg by taking me in . . . out of pity?"

Dick's walk ceased. From the expression on his face he looked as if he had been hit. Bewilderment and hurt were written across it. For a moment he stared at Tom as if unable to believe what he had heard. Then he went across to the bed. "Sorry! old man!" he said. "You . . . you've got the wrong end of the stick. That hadn't entered my mind. I don't care a curse about what people are saying or may say. I hadn't even thought about it. I put that suggestion to you because I thought that you and I could pull together. Why all the fuss?"

When Tom replied his voice was in an entirely different key. "It's no good, Dick. I . . . I can't do it." He sat up suddenly and held out his hand. "It's damn sporting of you! Thanks, old man!"

They shook, without further word.

Then Tom said, "Would you mind hunting up the Mater now?"

Dick nodded. As he reached the door he turned and said quietly, "Think it over!"

The door closed behind him.

Chapter Fourteen

To the naked eye there is very little difference between the various clubs along Piccadilly and down St. James' Street. They all present the same sacrosanctity, and the same glimpse of large leather-covered chairs occupied by distinguished-looking and slowly failing old men for whom the rest of life seems to consist of reading the papers until they nod off to sleep.

A man engrossed in thought, and afflicted momentarily with a non-working subconscious, might easily turn in at the wrong club and never be aware of his danger, — just as a visiting Catholic in a very High Church Episcopal sanctuary might imagine himself in the bosom of his own faith. But —

> "The little more, and how much it is!
> The little less, and what miles away!"

To the uninitiated the way along Piccadilly and down St. James' is beset with pitfalls and mantraps; for whereas certain among these equally discreet-looking institutions are indeed clubs, the rest are mere "pot-houses", socially impossible!

Sir Thomas Wickens had been rewarded, after standing his turn for many years upon the waiting list, by being elected to a certain club, halfway down St. James', in which, so it was said, a member had so far forgotten himself as to sneeze in the silence room. This member had immediately tendered his

resignation. It was duly accepted. It goes without saying that in a "pothouse" the committee would have had to ask for that man's resignation. The distinction is at once obvious.

Sir Thomas' election had marked an epoch in his life. It was a matter for high rejoicing, in spite of the fact that a full month elapsed before he could summon sufficient courage to present himself at the portals of what had become his own club. Even now, when he was somebody — there were members without an alphabetical suffix — he used the club with discretion, invariably a trifle self-conscious as he acknowledged the porter's acknowledgment of himself, his spirit quailing a little beneath the weight of tradition that looked down upon him from every oil portrait and tingled through the soles of his feet as he bravely ascended each thickly padded stair and moved from room to room with the slinking unease of a cat in a cathedral. There was no one chair in the whole club in which he could sit without a slight feeling of nervousness. He was always expecting some older member to come and claim it, ready to leap up with an apology on his lips and sneak off to hide his head in shame in another room.

It was not that any incident of this nature had ever occurred. On the contrary, many of the older members had gone out of their way to be nice to him, and for tremulous moments he had stood high upon a peak in Darien. He would, of course, have been much happier in one of the younger "pothouses", but, with the simple doggedness that had carried him through life, he strove to acquire the difficult technique of enjoyment in this club.

On leaving the house after Tom's return, he told

himself that it was a flash of inspiration to install himself there. All the way up in the train he saw himself protected behind an impenetrable barrier, secure, by the very nature of the place, from gossip and suspicion. The whole world might oscillate and crash, but no murmur of it might pass the head porter. Immunity lay behind those doors.

Even in the taxi his self-congratulatory mood held up. But as the porter gave him a stately "Good evening, Sir Thomas!" that conferred almost a benediction, he felt himself grow suddenly cold with fear.

"Supposing he finds out!" was the thought that extinguished the flash of inspiration, and it immediately enlarged itself to "Supposing it becomes known here!" Was n't this the very last place where the knowledge of his conscientious objector son should be even hinted at? Was not the club peopled with generals and admirals whose fathers and grandfathers before them had made history; with politicians and lawyers whose names stood for law and justice throughout the British Empire?

Like a man in a dream he went upstairs to his room, unable to look the oil portraits in the face, daring to take a full breath only when he had turned the key in the door and locked himself in.

Fortunately emotions fluctuate. If they could be sustained at a given intensity, the human race would probably perish. So the following morning, after a restless and difficult night, Sir Thomas had argued himself back to the belief that perhaps there was a certain virtue in being in the lion's den, provided one remained more or less invisible. Some inevitable counter emotions helped him to this philosophic

concept. He went back with hot repudiation to the memory of that barely formed thought of Tom's lying dead. It was untrue, he told himself emphatically, ridiculous to imagine that such a thing could even pass through his mind; and he turned from it, perhaps a shade too quickly, to consider the behavior of his wife.

It is possible that a psycho-analyst would have interpreted his own conduct as the outcome of the repression which had relegated him to the position of odd man out, that unconsciously he was using Tom's conscientious objection as the excuse to strike back at, to be revenged upon, the central group which had denied him, and the lack in himself which had not been able to conquer the denial.

In considering his wife's conduct, Sir Thomas discovered the real meaning of those hesitant agreements with which she had listened to his first diagnosis of the relations between Tom and himself. He saw now that those agreements were nothing but temporizings, lip service to his mood; that in reality her own intentions had run directly counter to his own. How otherwise could she have thrust him aside as though he were nothing but an obstacle between herself and that wretched boy? No, it was obvious on which side she stood! Had she rebuked Madge that morning at breakfast, for instance? She had not! And what was more, she had made excuses for Dick, pretending that the war had hurt him! Remarks, silences, glances, began to pile up as he went back, and in no time at all Sir Thomas had worked himself into a fine state of righteous indignation which sent him down to breakfast in an empty club with a firm, decided step that he was to

envy himself later in the day when the members arrived.

For four and a half years the French nation, both fighters and civilians, had drawn courage and inspiration from the terrible but imaginative and contagious phrase, "*On les aura!*" Something less vindictively poetic, something more practical and solid, was apparently necessary to stimulate the British temperament, and so a slogan came into being at the cry of which the civilian steeled himself against the most outrageous slings and arrows. That slogan was, "Business as usual!" What mattered a hundred thousand names in the casualty lists on a bright morning in the spring push? "Business as usual!" sent another hundred thousand marching gaily through the mud of Flanders.

Twice during the war Sir Thomas had uttered it through set teeth and had squared his shoulders and gone on. The two occasions were when he had seen Dick's name in the list of wounded.

The morning after he had gone to the club he uttered it again. In some curious way, however, it seemed to have lost its efficacy. He was surprised. He did not realize that the quality of courage with which one can face the fact of another's hurt is somewhat different to that which is necessary for the withstanding of one's own. At the repetition of the slogan no balm descended upon his soul, either that day, or for several ensuing days, as he went off to his office. He went through his work with a sense of impending disaster, jumpy and nervous, irritable with his assistants, his imagination picturing the hand that might drop at any moment upon his shoulder and the voice that would accuse him of shielding a

"conchy" and of being, therefore, a traitor to his country!

If anybody had told him that his whole line of reasoning and conduct in this matter was absurd, that he had created this obsession for himself, and that England was far too busy patting itself on the back for having won the war to bother about conscientious objectors, much less about their fathers, Sir Thomas would have been unable to believe it. The reason was that he himself regarded conscientious objectors as traitors and would have derived no little patriotic pleasure in hounding any that came his way, a pleasure that became the more keen from the moment that he received his knighthood. He was patriot enough before that event. But the three magic letters K.B.E. made him doubly so, giving him, as they did, a sense of personal responsibility to the country. He was no longer merely a humble subject who could potter along unnoticed. Those three letters made him a representative of his country, one who must set an example of loyalty and duty because from then on he was to live, as it were, upon an elevation. Unconsciously others would look to him, as a knight, for standards, or what was a knighthood for? In this way, therefore, his fear of discovery was not only self-created — being born of a fundamental expression of his own ego — but also self-fed.

For several days Sir Thomas endeavored to render himself invisible in the club. He dined early, in a remote corner of the room, and avoided the danger of chance encounters by retiring upstairs to the safe seclusion of his own room. Such social invitations as he received for himself and his wife he refused on

the plea of stress of work,—which was so urgent, he wrote, that it necessitated his staying in town for a time, hence his replying on club stationery.

One evening he was detained at the office. It was only a matter of half an hour, but this slight hitch in the routine that he had begun to establish was all that was necessary to jerk him out of the sort of Hindenburg line in which he fondly imagined himself. The half-hour's delay touched like a ripple one action after another, and, by the time he had changed into a dinner jacket and come down to the dining room, the club was rapidly filling. His accustomed table in the corner was already occupied. As Sir Thomas turned away, a mixture of annoyance and perturbation, a hand clapped him on the shoulder and the hearty voice of Buffen-Owen sent a series of warnings from every nerve center.

"Well! Well! If it isn't Wickens!"

Sir Thomas' smile was a little pale. "Delighted to see you!" he said.

Before he could clear a dry throat and offer acceptable reasons for hurrying away, his arm was taken by the Major General and he was being led to a table in the center of the room. It seemed to him that the all-pervading voice of his captor beat down every other sound in the room, and that all eyes were turned upon them.

"Come along!" said the General. "You'll dine with me! I was just looking for some one to save me from the horror of eating alone. Why, do you realize that the last time we cracked a bottle together must be when you appeared in the birthday honors? Just think of all that's happened since then! Where have you been hiding all this time?"

"Hiding!" Sir Thomas repeated the word before he could check himself. Then he mustered a laugh. "Why, my dear General, I—I haven't missed a day at the office for longer than I care to remember!"

While dinner was being ordered, the courses of which Sir Thomas agreed to without even hearing what was suggested, he was trying to pull himself together. Instead of blaming himself for being such a weak fool as to allow himself to be dominated in this way, he sat there telling himself that it was "just his luck", just the sort of thing that *would* happen, a malicious fate trying its best to spite him. If only he had gone out to a restaurant, or stayed in his room, or had not been detained at the office! To have to dine with this old fool, of all people, when every one at the surrounding tables couldn't help overhearing every word he said in that dreadful voice of his!

Under his eyebrows Sir Thomas looked round. At the next table were two men whom he did not know. Just beyond them, however, he caught sight of the well-known and benign face of Mr. Justice Clarke, dining with Wilson, the M.P. for St. Albans.

"There might even be a question in the House!" Sir Thomas' eyes dropped back to his plate and it was some time before he nerved himself sufficiently to continue looking. When he did he was comforted to observe several members of the club with whom he was on nodding acquaintance, some of them, like Buffen-Owen, still in their staff uniform.

At that moment the General leaned forward and, in what was intended for a confidential tone of voice, said, "I see we've got Lumsden dining here to-night.

He's sitting directly behind you. Powerful fellow, that!"

Sir Thomas nodded, unable to say anything. He reached out for his glass of water and took a sip, his hand not as steady as it should have been.

The mere thought of Lumsden at that moment was unnerving. Owner of half the newspapers in London, whose persistent cry throughout the war had been to take the fight right to Berlin, how merciless would be his attack on anything faintly approaching disloyalty.

"It would be difficult," said Sir Thomas in all sincerity, but stiffening his voice in the hope that Lumsden might hear, "to name a man who has done more magnificent work for the country. Why, in morale alone he must have been worth several divisions to us during the war!"

Buffen-Owen agreed with a nod as he plunged volubly into the soup that had just been placed before him.

As it happened, Lumsden did hear. He threw a rapid glance at their table and then, with a slight smile, said in a low voice to the man with whom he was dining, "Who's the little man with the dug-out?"

The other looked across and replied in the same tone.

"Wickens, Stock Exchange. K.B.E. for war service."

Lumsden nodded. "I remember!" he said. "Government finances. Able chap!"

Like a submarine, the General came to the surface again and wiped off his walrus moustache. "Thank God," he said, "our chef was beyond the age limit!

I really believe that we get better cooking here than anywhere else in London. The Carlton's disgraceful now, positively uncivilized!"

Sir Thomas took the opening gratefully and decided to play it for all it was worth. He knew from experience that Buffen-Owen flattered himself as an epicure. If he could get him really started on his favorite subject there might be a chance of getting him through this meal and out of the room before he broke more dangerous ground.

"Do you think so?" he said. "You surprise me! Why, I dined there the other night and was delighted with the excellence of the meal."

The General accepted the challenge. He came back with a roar. "Meal's right!" he said. "That's just what it was, a meal! Forgive my saying so, my dear Wickens, but you don't know anything about it. Now, I've specialized in cooking all my life. When I was with the regiment in India in '82 . . . "

He was off! Sir Thomas leaned back with a sigh of relief. With the aid of a judiciously flung "Really?" and "You don't say so!" he kept the General reminiscing over his military exploits in cooking through nearly half a century. Only the dusty records in the War Office retained the fact that in his day the old man had been a really fine soldier and leader of men. From his conversation and present appearance one could only sadly gather that his vocation had been outlasted by his avocation. If it be true that the British soldier "fights on his belly", then it was evident that the Major General should be a magnificent fighter. His discourse upon the culinary arts, garnished with glimpses of

border warfare and club scandals in the hill stations, lasted from the moustache-wiping after the soup to the arrival of the sweets. To any one who had not heard it before, it was well worth listening to, for, if one analyzed it at all, it became not merely the autobiography and travelogue of a soldier of an earlier day, but the story of the British in India.

Unfortunately Buffen-Owen's memory of the present was not as vivid as it was of the past, and he was unaware of the fact that his audience, as in the case of Sir Thomas, might have sat through it already. The club, as a whole, strenuously avoided all reference to food if the old man were within earshot; and to-night more than one amused glance was directed at Sir Thomas as the General proceeded along his well-known *via stomacha* in his usual parade-ground voice.

With the suggestion that they take their coffee outside, Sir Thomas was congratulating himself that in half a dozen more mouthfuls this ordeal would be over. He was even taking the credit to himself for having started the subject that had brought them thus far — one of the minor self-deceptions that human nature is prone to — when, with only one more piece of sweet upon his plate, Buffen-Owen looked up with an exclamation. "By the way! I knew there was something I wanted to ask you about! . . . That boy of yours!"

It seemed to Sir Thomas that every voice in the room was suddenly hushed, that the stillness of acute listening had descended upon the club.

He half rose, dropping his napkin. "Come along!" he said. "I . . . I've got a special cigar here that I want you to try with your coffee!"

"Indeed?" said the General. "Excellent! I shall be very glad. But, my dear fellow, I have n't finished my sweets yet! . . . And besides, there 's a savory coming,—soft roe on toast, with just a touch of red pepper! I've given special orders about it!"

There was nothing to be done. Sir Thomas had to sit down again. It was perhaps the bravest thing he ever did. And the sincerity which he managed to convey in his apology stood to his everlasting credit.

"Oh, I beg your pardon, General!" he said. "I did n't see that you had not finished. It was unpardonably rude of me!"

The General waved his hand. "Quite all right!" he said. "Waiter! Another napkin for Sir Thomas!"

Sir Thomas fluttered helplessly back into his chair, his hands moving aimlessly from one object to another on the table. Mercifully, the hum of conversation rose again, but although he strained his ears to catch the sounds of Lumsden's voice, and the M.P's, he could not hear them. They became like twin swords of Damocles. His mind was so occupied with these others that it was unable to entertain the simple idea of taking his turn at monopolizing the conversation.

The General finished his sweets. "Let 's see," he said, "what was it I was saying? . . . Ah, yes! That boy of yours! You know, of course, that I've been changed over? The question of the moment, as far as the War Office is concerned, is demobilization: and just as soon as the amnesty went into effect, they came to me and asked me to give them the bene-

fit of my experience in the demobilization office. Needless to say, I was only too glad. I don't mind telling you, Wickens, that it will be a painful day for me when I find myself once more upon the retired list! The best thing in my life has been the wearing of a uniform again these last years, to feel myself, at least in spirit, a part of the regiment in these gallant times. The old war horse hearing the bugle, you know, what?" He emptied his wineglass and set it down with a flourish. "Oh, well! . . . But to come back to your boy, the conscientious objector!"

What happened to Sir Thomas as the two dreadful words dropped like a couple of bombs in that public room was, if he had only known it, a very normal reaction. Dick, or for that matter any soldier, could have described every symptom,—the tension of waiting that acted like a tourniquet on the brain, stultifying, agonizing, until with the landing of the first five-nine or seventeen-inch shell, one passed instantaneously to the blessed release of action with a clarity of vision and decision magnified a hundred times above normal.

Sir Thomas behaved with a calmness that amazed himself. It was, indeed, only by his rigidity that one might have suspected that he was under pressure. With a little smile he met the General's eye.

"What of him?" he asked, his whole line of conduct opening clearly before him. The club should know that Brutus was an honorable man. He sat back and played with the stem of his wineglass.

"How did you find him when he got home?" asked the General. "What I would like to know is whether that long period of enforced discipline effected a salutary change in his ideas. I don't mind

confessing, Wickens, that it has always been a puzzle to me how a son of yours could possibly have played the coward like that!"

Sir Thomas nodded. "Especially when one thinks of his brother enlisting at the outbreak and returning with a Captaincy and a D.S.O. . . . Do you remember our splitting a bottle of champagne when he got it?"

"Indeed I do!" said the General. "And I remember his coming to see me a short while ago."

"That," put in Sir Thomas quickly, "was entirely without my knowledge!"

"A fine upstanding fellow," said the General, "if a little . . . er . . . dogmatic! But tell me about the other."

Sir Thomas accentuated his words slightly. If Lumsden were listening he should get it all.

"There is very little to tell," he said. "I don't care to know whether his imprisonment has changed his ideas or not. His whole attitude has been so incomprehensible to me throughout that I have no further interest in him. It is my opinion that his disloyalty is utterly unpardonable and I refuse to admit that he is any longer a son of mine. You will understand how deeply I feel this, General, when I tell you that I have ordered him out of my house!"

Sir Thomas did not turn round to see if Lumsden had taken that in. He did not even glance across at the M.P. He felt that by telling the General he had refortified his position, made himself doubly secure since, if the General spread the word around the club, which was almost inevitable, he would do so as an ally.

The rigidity left him. Now that he had made his

declaration of faith, it was surprising how much more easy he felt, almost jovial. The only weak point in the situation was that although the truth of what he had said could never be attacked, he had no definite assurance that Tom had left the house. At that very moment, indeed, he was undoubtedly being petted and coddled. He began to ask himself if he had not acted too hastily in coming up to town. It would be wiser to go back home and take immediate steps . . .

The General's exclamation interrupted that line of thought.

"God God, Wickens, you don't say so! It's a bad business, a bad business!" He shook his head, tugging at his moustache. "My own two sons are somewhere out there with the only epitaph that's worth a tinker's damn, — 'Killed in Action!' That's hard, Wickens, at my age! But, by God, sir, I'd rather have them both dead in face of the enemy than have one of them come back with a whole skin as a miserable conchy! . . . So you've kicked him out, eh? 'Pon my soul, I don't see what else you could have done! A conchy doesn't belong. With every man, woman and child having done their bit, I should think he'd feel like a pariah dog. But that doesn't make it any the easier for you, does it?"

Sir Thomas warmed at this expression of sympathy. The General voiced, he thought, the opinion of every right-minded person in England.

"You are quite right, General," he said. "It is the most difficult ordeal I have ever had to face. But it is a great encouragement to know that my friends, like yourself, approve of the stand I have taken."

"Well," said the General, "at least you have the consolation of that other boy of yours. A D.S.O. in the family is something to be proud of!"

"Ah!" said Sir Thomas. "You may well say so! A fine fellow, Dick! No perverted philosophizings about him! Now that the job's over and done with, he'll buckle down to work again and get on with it quietly. That's the kind we need . . . "

He continued at some length to expatiate upon Dick's virtues as though he had never told his wife that all the war had done for Dick was to make him infernally rude, as though he had never accused Dick of having insulted him at his own dinner table. For the moment these unfortunate facts were forgotten. He was basking in that glow of synthetic heroism common to all men whose sons were war heroes. There is, for example, little room for doubt that after the killing of Goliath, the father of David took no small share of the glory by relating that he had sired the boy,—even though, prior to that feat of arms, he had thought so little of David that he did not bother to present him to Samuel with his other sons.

The General was glad to give Sir Thomas the floor. It allowed him to devote his full attention to the savory,—that subtly flavored titbit of soft roe which set so delicate a period to his gastronomic activities.

Looking more than ever parrotlike, now that he was replete, he waited, blinking, while his guest's paternal fervor ran its course. It was very nice and all that sort of thing, but . . . it could be gone into so much more satisfactorily over coffee and a cigar; and then too an idea had come to him, a good idea.

His hands were on the edge of the table, ready to push back his chair. His opening came as Sir Thomas made the slight pause that marks the transition from one sentence to another.

"Wickens," he said, "I've been thinking! You don't want that other son of yours hanging about here, do you? Why don't you pack him off to the colonies, or, better still, America? Eh? . . . Come along, we must n't keep the coffee waiting!"

For a moment Sir Thomas, jerked abruptly from his line of thought, gazed blankly. But as he rose and preceded his host from the dining room, a gleam grew in his eyes. It was still there as he produced a slim leather case from his pocket, opened it and held it out to Buffen-Owen with a "Permit me, General!"

"Ah!" said Buffen-Owen. "Thank you!"

Together they sank into deep leather armchairs and a man brought them coffee as they offered each other the little politenesses usual to the ritual of cigar-clipping.

"I always think," said the General, between puffs, "that this is the most blissful moment of the day!"

The words "pack him off to the colonies" were playing a tune in Sir Thomas' head. He leaned back and nodded agreement through the clinging cigar smoke.

"Yes," he said, "because it's so well earned."

Chapter Fifteen

TOM'S estimate of his returning strength was over-optimistic. The best he could do in the couple of days that he had allotted to getting well was to crawl downstairs, thanking God for the banisters, and occupy an armchair in front of the fire with an immobility that surprised himself, and talk to Dick by the hour.

It was as though his effort had been made in the prison camp. To get hold of himself again involved more than at the moment he had left in him. He was drained deeper than he knew. Reluctant to look ahead, he was content to lie back and let the world revolve around him.

The world was a small one, only the family and the servants. For several days he was vastly interested to watch the interplay of attitude and personality among his mother, brother and sister.

Before the war, he had, like any member of a family, pigeonholed each one more or less subconsciously as they filled an allotted part in the scheme of his growing up. They represented certain needs, values, obstructions sometimes, in the path of his development; but in whatever light they happened to stand at any given time, they were as integral a part of him as hunger or sleep, and accepted as such.

Neither he nor they realized that when he graduated from Oxford he graduated also out of the family; that although physically he went on sharing

the routine of South Brayton, occupying the same pigeonhole in the minds of the others, his real life — the life of conviction and dream and ambition — had made him, in one sense, as much odd man out as his father. The differences were that whereas Sir Thomas had remained behind the others, Tom had gone ahead; that whereas Tom could come out of his inner self and meet them on their own terms of affection and interest, his father could not. But not even Tom had realized the full extent of his isolation from them until the moment arrived when he had to make his choice between conviction and the line of least resistance.

Again it was something of his father, the inherited quality of doggedness, which, making Sir Thomas a bitter-ender to carry the war to Berlin, made of Tom in his conviction a bitter-ender against the war in any form.

The choice had not been easy. Tom's fight with himself was in some sort the kind of fight in which Peter failed when he denied his leader, a conflict of moral and physical courage. Where Peter failed physically in the presence of the soldiery, Tom was tempted to fail morally. In other words, everything in his nature called to him to join up and go out to France; that quality of adventurous perception which had made him as a child appreciate the Squire's riding up the staircase on horseback; the inquisitive-mindedness that had urged him to explore the "isms" at Oxford; the gregarious side of him which kept him one of the family long after he had left it behind, — these made him see the war in all its glamour and allurement, its terrible romance. He felt the urge of it, the atavistic appeal, the strange

desire that is a sort of primeval curiosity to measure oneself up against an adversary. He felt also the herd impulse, that queer, childlike, self-protective instinct to imitate the rest, to run when they run and stop when they stop, without knowing or caring why.

The pull of all these things was strong, so strong that he nearly enlisted, nearly chucked overboard the intellectual flywheel which eventually held him steady. Tom had read his history — between the lines — had grasped something of the instinctive fear which divides one race from another, the common ambition of self-expression which inevitably brings them into conflict, the common dearth of moral philosophy which makes them fall back upon a proud assertion of force to justify an inflated national ego, rather than make a humble admission of misconduct.

To Tom, who had led wild debates against the spirit of imperialism on the ground that it fostered envy, hatred and all malice, the tense days of August, 1914, had only one possible interpretation, — the reaping of the whirlwind. As he saw it, it was idle to lay the blame at this door or that, since each and every player in the international chess game had contributed a move towards the deadlock which resulted in the wholesale sacrifice of pieces. To him, the frantic eleventh-hour gestures of the politicians, mired in their own droppings, were as pathetic as their subsequent idealistic outcry was false. The holocaust was nothing but a burnt offering on the altar of self-interest disguised as self-preservation, a complete confession of intellectual bankruptcy.

"In plain terms," he said to himself, "stripped of all verbiage, it is simply wholesale murder for a mess of pottage!"

Morally, therefore, to get into the game was to condone it. From his point of view it would be just as logical, he felt, to walk out from the office and shoot down all the brokers whose competition with his father was becoming too keen, as to cross the Channel and shoot down a lot of men who happened to be wearing field gray, rather than khaki or sky blue, simply because their respective countries' competition had become too keen.

He saw Dick go off,—and cursed himself for the indecision that prevented his going too.

He saw Madge join up,—and died a thousand deaths at the half-questioning, half-hostile looks with which the older men in the office began to regard him.

"Young Unmarried Men—Your King And Country Need You!" . . . It was not easy to walk the streets in those days and meet old Oxford friends dressed up as officers and see them stare at you and pass by as if you didn't exist; to sit down in the club and find that presently you had created a vacant space around you; to see girls with whom you had picnicked on the river color up and look the other way; to receive anonymous letters containing a scented half-sheet of paper on which was the one word "SLACKER"; to catch from time to time a queer searching look in the eyes of your mother . . . The tide had set and the fierce undercurrent was tugging at him.

But nothing that happened in Belgium or France could convince him that he was wrong. On the

contrary, every day added to the conviction that he was right.

The climax was reached when Helen Portman, herself as white as a sheet and with a strange hardness in her young, untouched eyes, faced him in Bond Street one afternoon and handed him a white feather.

Up to that day there had been no word spoken between these two to indicate anything more than friendliness; but when the laws of mutual attraction begin to operate there are certain unmistakable attendant signs. Neither Tom nor Helen had been able to avoid their display.

The exchange of a symbolic feather killed something in them both. Tom crunched it in his hand and let it fall to the ground. It lay between them like an epitaph, till a puff of wind blew it away.

Then Tom spoke. "You brainless little fool! Don't you understand that I should be a coward if I did join up? No, of course you don't. You never will." And he left her standing there and crossed the street . . .

As Tom looked on from his armchair by the fire, it seemed to him that Dick, surprisingly enough, came nearest to understanding his motives and actions. His mother was like a box whose lid remains obstinately shut. He was unable to find the key. She indulged in an orgy of fussing over him — the prerogative of any mother in such circumstances — but there was about it a certain quality of overemphasis, of nervousness almost, that set him wondering. That she had suffered in the war he took for granted, but the effects were not easy to perceive. In Dick, the evidence of suffering lay in his bewilderment, his lack of laughter, his periods of

silence, a certain eager questioning look in his eyes, —all of which sat oddly and remarkably on that once bland and care-free athlete. Tom chuckled and sighed as well as he defined it: "The travail of a mind in process of birth!" But apart from that expression of nerves in regard to himself, his mother struck him as being no less placid and poised than she had ever been. She appeared to be pursuing undisturbed the "even tenor of her way",—like a tree or a house just outside the immediate path of a cyclone.

Madge was more easily read. Apparently breezy and casual—her morning greeting was a smiling "Well, how's the ex-convict to-day?" or "Good morning, martyr! Any signs of improvement in civilization this morning?"—she revealed all the symptoms of a volcano on the point of eruption. Physically she was unable to sit down for more than two minutes at a time. He noticed that she lit one cigarette from another before any one of them was half smoked, as though it bored her, as though she hadn't time to finish it. Mentally, her restlessness expressed itself by her contradiction of everything. She seemed to be passing through a revolt against the standards by which she had quite happily grown up, without having succeeded in enumerating others. She was in the trough. Spiritually, she seemed to Tom to have lost something, as if a certain bloom had been rubbed off by too violent a contact with life, as if a general loosening had taken place; and, after a day or two, it came to him that her sweepingly cocksure attitude was an attempt to hide the realization of it from herself, an attempt to bluff herself through.

"If she stays in this backwater," said Tom, "she'll go mad, or commit some wild extravagance that'll smash the rest of her life. I wonder if she'll let me help? Or if I *can* help? Women are queer devils. All their processes seem to be different. Helen, for instance . . . no . . . "

Tom deliberately refused that line of thought. After a moment, a shadow of a smile touched the corner of his mouth as he shrugged his shoulders. "Damn it, we're just as queer! . . . That's absolutely dead, three years buried,—but for my vanity's sake I'd like to know what it's done to her!"

Chapter Sixteen

To an observer unaware of the British temperament, the rhythm and quiet order of that household would have seemed as even and enduring as time. He would have missed the significance of a tiny scene one afternoon when Lady Wickens was pouring tea through a silver strainer, and Wilson, spick and span in white cap and apron, was passing toast in a warmed and covered plate, while Dick and Tom, ensconced in armchairs, completed the harmonious domestic picture.

"By the way," said Madge, breaking a momentary silence, "we've been mercifully free from the village tabbies lately! Have you renounced your Thursday tea fights, Mater?"

Lady Wickens looked across at Tom, the sugar tongs poised.

"One lump, dear?"

"Please," said Tom.

Lady Wickens allowed the piece of sugar to glide into the tea and handed the cup to Wilson. Then she answered Madge.

"No, darling," she said. "I dare say it's the miserable weather that's kept them from coming."

"Thank God for small mercies!" said Dick quickly.

But Madge looked skeptically at her mother and then her eyes went meaningly to Tom. She smiled to herself, shrugged her shoulders and bit crunchingly into a mouthful of toast.

Lady Wickens would have liked to believe that it was the weather which was the cause not only of their defection from her tea table, but also of the access of chilly politeness which she had experienced from more than one of her friends since Tom's return. She said nothing, however, but went on quietly pouring tea, glad that Dick apparently revenged himself for having been kept in all day by the rain by anathematizing all tea fights, and painstakingly drawing a herring across the real issue.

Another fact which would have entirely escaped notice was the absence of Sir Thomas. At meal times, or in the drawing-room afterwards, he was not mentioned. There might have been no such person. And yet, if one had heard Dick close the door of his sister's room carefully and exclaim, "Where the hell's the Gov'nor all this time? Ought we to let this thing go on?"—or if one had seen Lady Wickens sit down in the privacy of her room and write on a piece of notepaper, "My dear Thomas . . ." and then bite her pen, one might have gathered that although Sir Thomas was out of sight, he was far from being out of mind; that beneath the smooth-running surface was a strong and deep current of emotion and worry. It only required the evidence of Benham to complete the proof that some at least of its aspects had penetrated to the servants' quarters.

He was on his way to seek an interview with Lady Wickens when Wilson ran crying to Madge and announced that "she was all of a mix-up and did n't see as how she should have to leave a good place because Mr. Benham said that she would be ruining her chances by staying."

Benham, meanwhile, found Lady Wickens in the study and, having requested "a word with her", came straight to the point. "I should like to give notice to leave at the end of the week, my lady."

Was there no stability anywhere? A little forlornly, Lady Wickens echoed his words.

"To leave at the end of the week?" she exclaimed. "Why, Benham, is there anything wrong? . . . Are your wages not sufficient?" To have to engage in the desperate hunt for a butler now was almost beyond endurance.

"Quite sufficient, thank you, my lady."

Lady Wickens stressed the point, however. She had had a long experience of servants. "If an extra ten shillings a week would help to smooth out any little difficulties downstairs, I feel sure that Sir Thomas would make no objection. I know that he would be very sorry to see you go, Benham! And so should I!"

Benham bowed. "You are very kind, my lady! I'm sure I've done my best to give satisfaction, but I feel that you could get some one better suited to the position."

There was a finality in his tone that left little doubt as to his intentions. Frankly curious, and perhaps a trifle sharp, now that both bribery and flattery had failed, Lady Wickens said, "Well, if you insist on going, you might at least tell me your reason!"

Benham coughed deprecatively. "If you insist, my lady."

"I do!" said Lady Wickens.

"Well," said Benham, "it's not that the position is not comfortable. It is, and I shall be sorry to

leave it. But it's a matter of conscience, my lady. You see, I invested all my savings in war loans—and while I'd work my hands off for Captain Richard, I'm afraid I don't feel the same way with regard to Mr. Thomas, my lady. Therefore it seems to me my duty is clear."

Lady Wickens' hands were clasped together in her lap, tightly. Unable to say anything, she nodded.

Succumbing to the itch to spill over, once the class barrier had been lowered, a characteristic of his kind, Benham continued to unburden himself; and, like most people afflicted with an excess of zeal, knocked the foundations from the beautiful platform that he had built up.

"More than that, my lady, if you'll pardon my saying so, I've got to think of my own interests. If I stayed with you now and should have to look for another position later, I don't think it would help me to get one if it became known that I had remained for any length of time in the same household with a . . . with a gentleman who had refused to fight. I really don't, my lady!"

Through tight lips Lady Wickens made answer. "That'll do, Benham! You leave at the end of the week!"

Somewhat taken aback—he had thought he was getting along nicely—Benham bowed. "Very good, my lady." And with his accustomed dignity in no way impaired, he left the room.

Madge, having reassured Wilson, came into the study a few minutes later to find that she had to reassure her mother, who was torn between anger at Benham and alarm for Tom.

"What *will* your father say?" she wound up.

The news reached Tom via an indignant Dick, who was all for calling Benham in and "ticking him off",—the army equivalent for emphasizing discipline by indulging in highly colored language.

Tom shook his head. "I'm afraid it wouldn't do any good, old man," he said. "And, besides, you forget that he probably took his lead from the Gov'nor!"

In a million other families the problem of readjustment was being faced in almost as many different ways. Into the space of four years had been crammed the experience of centuries and the process of assimilation had just begun. The London which Dick had found so completely alien was a sort of sounding board that magnified the clamor of the common reaction, the feeling of suspended animation, that when the war stopped everything stopped. It was as though the world were emerging from a four-year emotional drunk and were staggering and stumbling wildly in every direction. But whether the clamor took the form of tears or jazz, asceticism or immorality, it represented only the universal groping for something, anything, to fill the abhorrent vacuum between stopping and going on. There seemed to be no reconciliation between the immediate past and the immediate future. The two had become at opposite poles of habit and understanding.

The group at South Brayton was fortunate in having a definite point on which to focus its emotional attention, even though that point was like an iceberg, seven eighths submerged, upon which the family ship might be wrecked.

To Dick, the bewildering part of the situation which hinged upon the disposal of Tom was its unexpected continuation of the process of disillusionment which he had suffered in the firing line. To find that his father and mother had ceased to fill the places that not only he, but God and nature, had allotted to them, was the last straw to his bitter resentment, his sense of betrayal. The war might at least have left them intact!

To Madge, the strained relations and the conflicting points of view were simply a vicarious excitement, taking the place of the jazz and cocktail parties to which she would inevitably have turned had they been living in London. The drama of Tom's return and her father's flight contained for her nothing of tragedy or even of pathos. She saw it as a Gilbertian storm in a teacup, an entirely humorous and inevitable clash of ego. Unconsciously it was merely a welcome stimulant to this keen, alert girl, who, having vibrated to an undreamed-of voltage, was suddenly disconnected. As the days went by and her father still kept away, as she saw Dick agonizing over it and Tom philosophically waiting until he could stand on his feet again, while her mother went about doing a million unnecessary things as a relief to her nerves, Madge reached out towards the feeling of impending happening as naturally as a ravenous man would reach out for food. Benham's "ratting", as she called it, was the last and most subtle touch of all. She came bubbling in to Tom with his morning egg and milk and perched on the corner of the billiard table while he drank it.

"Isn't it perfectly priceless!" she laughed.

"Think of that pompous old fool being scared of his reputation because you're here! The Gov'nor will go off the deep end when he hears of it! He likes Benham, and anyway butlers are at a premium, even though they were too old to be killed off in stacks! But the gorgeous thing of all is that although the Gov'nor'll be as mad as a hornet, he won't be able to utter a word because he sneaked off for the same reason! . . . My Lord! There's going to be a beautiful strafe when he comes back! Are you game, pacifist?"

Chapter Seventeen

Sir Thomas' return was unheralded by telephone or telegraph.

With some care he selected a train that would get him to South Brayton about the time dinner would be over. Instead of calling up for Edwards, he hired a car at the station, stopped it at the entrance to the drive and walked up the front steps, not exactly on tiptoe, but with a lightness of tread that was hardly characteristic.

The family were having their after-dinner coffee in the drawing-room; and with two cigars and a cigarette going, and a wood fire crackling cheerily, the atmosphere, to all appearances, was one of well-fed relaxation.

As Sir Thomas opened the front door and stepped into the hall he heard the sound of their voices, and then Madge's irritating laugh, which broke off in the middle as he closed the door behind him.

There was a momentary silence which Sir Thomas noted with a certain inward satisfaction as he took off his hat and placed it on the hall table, removed his coat and dropped it on to a chair. Then as he paused for a moment planning what he would say, he heard a quick step in the drawing-room. The door was opened and Dick was framed in it. Sir Thomas smiled at the expression of amazement on his son's face.

"I hope I don't intrude?" he said, with a rising

inflection on the final word that made Dick tingle all over.

If Sir Thomas could have seen the effect created by the sound of his voice, he would have been rewarded for his tactics.

Lady Wickens looked up startled, rose from her chair, paused for a moment, undecided, and then sat down again. Madge raised her eyebrows until they disappeared under her hair and gave a long, noiseless whistle. Tom looked quickly across at his mother, then finished his coffee, unfolded his long legs and went over to the small table beside her chair.

"I'd like another cup, Mater, please," he said, and turned so that he faced the door.

Dick moved to one side. "Come along in, Gov'nor," he said. "You're just in time for some coffee."

For the briefest of moments Sir Thomas paused. Then he walked into the drawing-room, *his* drawing-room.

For years his customary evening greeting to his wife had consisted of a "Well, my dear?" followed by his touching her cheek with his lips. And for years the reply had been, "Well, Thomas! Have you had a hard day?"

On this particular evening the law of habit had its way with Sir Thomas. He crossed over to her and went through the little formula. But instead of the usual pseudo-sympathetic reply, Lady Wickens looked at him quietly and said, "So you've decided to come back!"

Sir Thomas was touched with a sense of injustice. She ought to have been glad to see him. He ignored

the remark and took up a position with his back to the fire, his legs apart and his hands under his coat tails.

Lady Wickens murmured to Tom, "Here's your coffee, dear!" and in the same tone Tom said, "Thanks!"

A slight feeling of annoyance began to creep into Sir Thomas' face. He had expected ejaculation, reproaches perhaps, at least surprised comment. This utter calm, this continuance of coffee-pouring, was deliberately intended to exasperate. He fixed Madge with his eye.

"I suppose it's not the thing nowadays for a girl to say good evening to her father?"

Madge crossed one leg over the other. "Oh, I believe they're still doing it!" she said. "Did you have a nice time at the club?"

Again Sir Thomas ignored the question. "Just touch the bell for Benham, will you?" he said brusquely.

Madge moved her head slightly. "Would you mind, Dick?" she drawled. "You're nearest!"

Dick did so.

From the moment that his father entered the room, Tom had watched him, not so much expecting as waiting to see if he would give him even a glance of recognition. Sir Thomas had not taken the slightest notice of him.

Tom put down his coffee cup, strolled across to the fireplace and stood beside his father.

"Good evening, Gov'nor!" he said.

Sir Thomas rocked a little on his heels.

"Good evening!" he said. "I thought I should find you still here."

Tom smiled inwardly. Whenever his father had to haul any one over the coals at the office, he invariably rocked on his heels.

"Of course!" he said. "I hadn't any idea of going without seeing you."

Going! Then it was victory! Sir Thomas snatched at the word, fondled it. Firmness — that was the secret! Make up your mind and stick to it! He drew himself up and squared his shoulders.

"So they've told you my decision, eh?"

Tom leaned an elbow on the mantelpiece. "Oh, I wasn't thinking about that," he said. "You see, I'd made up my mind to leave here before I was released."

The remark was followed by complete silence. Sir Thomas ceased rocking. Madge smothered a chuckle.

The squareness went out of Sir Thomas' shoulders. A surge of anger came welling up inside him. At that moment his whole mental table of values seemed to shift. He was like a man staring at himself for the first time in one of those magnifying shaving mirrors. Up to then he had convinced himself, quite sincerely, that his own safety depended on his being rid of a conscientious objector, — not only physically rid, but emotionally, so that the fears and responsibilities would be lifted from him, so that he would be able to step out and look people in the eye again, free and unhampered in the enjoyment of his rank, without the dreadful sense of having to conceal something of which he was not even guilty, without the depressing burden of having to live down what would become the subject of constant accusation if he allowed his son to remain. His nearest approach

to the achievement of that freedom of mind was at the instant of his announcing to the Major General that he had ordered his son out of the house. That had been his declaration of faith, his gesture of release, the *coup de grâce* to his fears, because — but this he did not know — he had achieved at last the successful expression of his own ego.

And now, at a word, the whole structure caved in and tumbled like a cottage at the impact of a shell. As he stood there in front of the fire and heard Madge's amused laugh, a shadow slid over the triumph he had felt on hearing that Tom was going. The expected feeling of freedom did not come. Tom had made up his mind to leave here before he was released, — and so a wave of anger flooded him, through the murk of which he had a dim vision of himself, cheated, done out of the victorious assertion of authority, the domination of his son, and, for that matter, of his family. In a sense he took shelter behind his anger in the struggle not to admit to himself that it was the desire to express his own ego which was the fundamental motive of his actions. He trembled at the mockery of the fact that all the emotions which had torn him from the time he had made up his mind to kick the boy out had been for nothing, were squandered, wasted, spilled on the ground, — the quarrel with Dick, the stay at the club, the ordeal with Buffen-Owen, all for nothing! He had no domination, no authority! They were probably all laughing at him up their sleeves. Hadn't that girl snickered aloud, damn — yes, damn her! Damn them all! They didn't care whether he lived or died! His going away hadn't made the faintest difference. They just did what

they wanted to and shouldered him out of the way, and he could do nothing! . . .

He stood there biting his lip, his hands clenched behind him, chewing the cud of bitterness, until a new thought forced its way through and sustained him. Perhaps the boy was lying! Perhaps he had made that up, had said it to cover himself, to protect his vanity against being kicked out! Ah! That was it! Of course it was! Why should he *want* to leave home, a comfortable home like this with every luxury, servants, a car, golf? There had never been any talk of it before. Not only that, but here he still was, lingering, taking his time about it, even though he said he had made up his own mind to go! Palpably it was a lie! The boy was only going because he wanted to save himself the disgrace of being kicked out. Anybody could see that with half an eye. Buffen-Owen would interpret it like that, and if he did, why not the rest? He had told Buffen-Owen that, and, by God, he'd stick to it! People should understand that he was master in his own house whatever complexion the others tried to put on it!

Sir Thomas' chin began to stick out again. The magic of self-deception had done its work. He cleared his throat, swallowed, turned to Tom and said with all the sarcasm at his command, "Very interesting! I suppose you've come to the conclusion that we're not fit to live with now that we've unfortunately won the war? Are you going to Germany, by any chance?"

The question needed no answer and Tom knew it. The impasse was relieved by Benham, who tapped at the door and came in.

"Bring me some cigars!" snapped Sir Thomas.

Benham's profession debarred any expression of surprise at the sight of his employer. Without the movement of an unnecessary muscle he replied, "What brand, Sir Thomas?"

"Eh? . . . Oh, Romeo and Juliets."

"Very good, Sir Thomas!" Benham turned and went over to a deep cabinet let into the wall.

Madge looked up with a gleam in her eyes. "Romeo and Juliets," she murmured. "How romantic!"

Tom hid a smile and went back to his coffee.

"Will you have some coffee, Thomas?" asked Lady Wickens.

"No, thank you!"

"Oh, Dick! Chuck me a gasper, old thing, will you?" said Madge.

As Dick got up, went over to her chair and held out his cigarette case, Benham produced the cigars.

"By the way, Gov'nor," said Madge, between puffs, "you'll be interested to know that Benham has given notice to go at the end of the week."

Sir Thomas glared at Benham. "What's that?"

Benham coughed, extremely uncomfortable. He ventured a side glance in the direction of Madge.

"I should prefer to speak to you about it afterwards, Sir Thomas," he said.

Madge smiled. "Oh, there's no secret about it! Benham's going because he objects to Tom about the place,—don't you, Benham?"

Her eyes went from one to the other in boundless satisfaction as first Benham colored to the roots of his neck, and then her father, abruptly taking the

box of cigars from him, tried to cover his embarrassment as he fumbled within it.

"I'll talk to you in the morning!" he said.

Wordlessly Benham walked out of the room.

With a perfectly straight face Madge went on. "Really, I can't think what's coming over the servant class these days. Outside of a Shaw play, who ever heard of a butler giving notice because he didn't agree with the particular shade of political opinion adopted by the son of the house? This dreadful war, I suppose. Positively impertinent, I call it! Don't you agree with me, Gov'nor?"

Sir Thomas had struck a match, but he forgot to light the cigar. "I agree with you so little," he said to Madge, "that I ask you to be good enough to leave this room! . . . In fact," his eyes swept round to his wife and Dick, "I should be glad if you would also go. I have something to say to Tom, and I should prefer to say it to him alone!" The match was burning down. He tossed it into the fire.

It was perhaps significant that only Dick rose to his feet. Madge took a pull at her cigarette, exhaled it noisily and sat back more comfortably in her chair.

Lady Wickens had the experience of more than thirty years of her husband's moods and tenses. With such practice, little more than a glance or an intonation was necessary to enable her to give a very fair reading of his condition of mind at any moment of the day or night. Like most English wives she had perforce acquired the native wisdom of the reed that bends to the wind; but though she had found that it suited her own temperament, she had her moments of doubt as to whether it would

ever suit Madge's. Such a wind as she could endure would snap something in Madge. To-night, however, her reflections did not turn upon her daughter. It was her husband's presence, which seemed to indicate that his antagonism to her son had reached its apex, that concerned her. She had no difficulty in appreciating the reason for the comparative secrecy of his return,—a simple desire to dramatize. It was the reason for the return itself that puzzled her. She had wondered at first whether he had changed his mind about Tom's going, but from the manner in which he had said, "Well, my dear!"—it had lacked its usual lack of emphasis—she gathered that such an idea could only have sprung from her own desire. Everything he had said and done since confirmed that fact. Sarcasm was not a favorite weapon of his. As a rule he employed peevishness, or angry exposition. The change could only mean that he had some new scheme, picked up in town, no doubt, and that he had come back to try and enforce it.

She arrived at this conclusion before Sir Thomas requested her to go, so there was not a moment's hesitation in her reply. "I think, dear," she said, "that whatever you have to say to Tom had better be said before us all!"

Dick nodded. "I think the Mater's right, Gov'nor! It's a family show!"

"Better get it off your chest here, Gov'nor!" said Madge. "It's three to one against the hush stuff!"

"Don't *you* think so, Tom, dear?" insisted Lady Wickens.

Tom looked from one to the other, half amused, half perplexed. "Family show?—Hush stuff?—

Aren't we exaggerating this, rather?—It seems to me that if you would condescend to shut up, Madge, old thing, and not throw your weight about so much, we might get along in perfect harmony. What do you say, Gov'nor?"

Madge grinned. "Who said that a woman's place is the home?—All right, I won't say another word!"

Sir Thomas drew in his breath and raised one hand in a gesture of resigned helplessness. His whole attitude was as if he would have liked to say, "Your blood be on your own heads!"

The others remained silent, waiting for him to begin.

Madge, watching her father like a lynx, had a sudden flash of intuition. "He's begun to enjoy himself!"

It was true. Without having said anything, or made any other movement than that wave of his hand, an indefinable change had come over him, as though, unconsciously, he were beginning to respond to the satisfaction of being in the spotlight, the center of the group attention. It didn't matter that the reason of his being there was unethical. He was in the condition of diseased ego of a girl who would rather be laughed at by men than receive no male attention at all.

Dick sat down and with nervous fingers tapped a cigarette on the back of his hand. Presently he became aware of the fact that he was doing so. He stopped immediately and began picking the cigarette to pieces.

He was bringing more to this meeting than any other member of the family. In some odd, emo-

tional way he felt that his whole future code of right and wrong, his whole approach to going on, were bound up in the outcome of what was about to take place. Almost everything that had occurred at home since his return had piled itself up on the disenchantment that the war had forced upon him. It had stirred within him a latent cynicism that he didn't know he possessed, that was utterly alien to him, a most unwilling bedfellow. He detested being cynical. He wanted to go on believing, as he had before, that everything was simple and right and honest, that people weren't beastly and greedy and grabbing, that there was no need to be on one's guard eternally. He hated the new vision that was his, which made him read constantly between the lines, question the simplest relationships, and discover always depths of which, before the war, he had not the faintest suspicion. He wanted to go back to that happy blindness. This new state was misery. Inside the family it seared like a bullet. And it made him shrink from looking out because there things would be, must be, *were*, so infinitely much worse that it would be like jabbing a knife into the bullet wound and holding it there.

His great hope in France had been to get back home, and there, in the atmosphere of that sublimated home, to win back to peace of mind. The actuality was like being hung up on barbed wire and shot at by both sides. Like a plant forced in a hothouse, his growth was out of all proportion to the normal, and, naturally, his mental indigestion, growing pains, were all the fiercer. As a direct result of the war he had reached in one bound, emotionally, if not by reasoned conviction, the same

point of departure which had been Tom's before the war. Dick, however, had not the same background of inquiry. Consequently he found himself in the baffled condition of believing firmly things for which he had no actual proof. He had acquired an uncomfortable new faith and was in process of feeling his way towards its codification. He was like a man trying hard not to wake up, although in the extreme of discomfort on his bed, because he knows and dreads what he will see when he opens his eyes. Here at home they had been, as it were, half opened by this new and entirely unsuspected father and mother, to whom he found himself a stranger and yet not a stranger. It wouldn't have been so painful if he had not been their son, but merely a guest in the house. As a guest, he would have felt himself free to regard them as representative specimens of the civilian, back-area world whose actions and reactions, in the light of the firing line, had come to seem utterly despicable, so far did they fall short of even the common decencies.

In the dilemma of seeing but refusing to believe, he had turned to Tom with pathetic eagerness. His one comfort was having found Tom. Tom knew. Tom had "been through it",—in the sense of having paid in full. And when Dick opened his heart in the usual stumbling, hesitant, slangy, public-school-and-varsity way, he was met, not by a stone wall of superior argumentative misunderstanding, but by a sympathy which preceded his labored verbal fumblings and jumped to the hidden shade of meaning. He was amazed to find that what were in the nature of great discoveries to him were almost platitudes to Tom; that where it had taken four years of

war to force him to certain realizations, Tom had long ago worked his way through them. Dick, for instance, who had always gone to church with the delightful irregularity of the Episcopalian, had accepted without another thought the dictum that God was on the side of the Allies — Of course! What else? — and had even been inclined to resent as "a bit of damned cheek" the German claim that God was "*mit uns*." Then he began to think about it, and the utter futility of both claims began to dawn upon him. When, however, he touched upon that point in one of his sessions with Tom in front of the fire, Tom's reply made him think of a searchlight picking up a plane at night.

"Comic stuff, wasn't it?" laughed Tom. "I've always thought that if the God-idea were not eternally propagandized by a lot of unintelligent blighters who see it as an easy way of earning a comfortable and gentlemanly living, it would either die out altogether or develop into something worth while."

Dick had never heard what he called "religion" summed up as "the God-idea", but that definition fitted in to the ghastly riddle of the battlefields like a missing part in a jigsaw puzzle.

To-night his one prayer was that his father would see Tom's point as he had seen it, would climb down from his beastly civilian attitude and emerge from the camouflage of pompous funk as the really decent sort he must be.

He was still picking the cigarette to pieces when his father began to speak.

Sir Thomas was by no means sorry to have an audience for his pronunciamento.

"Very well!" he said. "I forego my right to a

little privacy on the understanding that you leave the talk to Tom and myself. I don't intend that this shall be a debate in any sense of the word. That stage of the affair has long since passed . . . Now," he fixed Tom with his eye, "the point is that you are leaving this house, — whether of your own volition or not is immaterial!"

"Excuse me, Gov'nor," said Tom quietly. "I think it is decidedly material. It wouldn't do you any good if it got about that you had been hasty or ungenerous. I think you would be wise to let it be understood that the decision to go came from me."

Dick nodded to himself. "That's damn sporting!" he thought. "Now's the Gov'nor's chance to come through like a gentleman!"

Sir Thomas raised his eyebrows. "You would have made a good lawyer!" he said. "That you should show any anxiety as to public opinion about myself strikes me as rather humorous. However, I am perfectly willing to let the onus of departure rest on you. It will at least save me from your mother's accusation of being hasty or ungenerous. Incidentally, when you hear what I have to say, I flatter myself that neither she nor any one can make any accusation but one of unusual generosity."

"Oh, God!" thought Dick. "It sounds like the bloody Staff! There's not a chance!"

"Now," continued Sir Thomas, "the position is this. The common sacrifice has been so great that your standing in this country will be extremely delicate and uncomfortable. I doubt if you will meet with anything but antagonism here for many years. I may say that that is not merely my own opinion. While I was in town, I took the opportunity to

sound out one or two men who are in a position to know, and they agree that it would be folly for you to neglect the opportunity that I offer you. Briefly, it is this. I propose to place to your credit in any bank you care to name an annual sum of a thousand pounds. It will be yours to do what you like with. I expect neither an accounting nor repayment. It is an amount sufficient to enable you to get on your feet again and make a new start in the world. In return for that I ask one thing,—that instead of remaining in England, you go abroad. Thanks to the war, there should be some remarkable opportunities in the various mandatory countries of which we have accepted the responsibility; although you may find it wiser, under the circumstances, to pick out some neutral country. Be that as it may, I leave the choice of country entirely to you, provided that you leave England! . . . For your own sake, I urge you to think that over very seriously. As I look at it myself, I fail to see how any man in his seven senses could hesitate to accept!"

As Sir Thomas ended and began to coax his cigar back to a glow, a ripple of nervous relaxation touched the members of the family.

Had any of them known of his dinner with Buffen-Owen, they would have appreciated his masterly interpretation of it: "I took the opportunity to sound out one or two men . . . "

As it was, Lady Wickens let out a deep breath. "A thousand a year!" she murmured to herself. "That *is* generous, but all the same I don't like it!"

Madge uncrossed her legs and wriggled violently in her chair, as though the effort to go on sitting still was beyond endurance.

"Congratulations, Gov'nor!" she said. "I will say that if you want a thing, you don't haggle about the price!"

With a gleam in his eyes, Dick leaned towards his brother. "What do you say, Tom?" he began in a low eager voice. "Why don't we do that? Why don't you and I clear out together? I'm fed up with this place! Let's go where they don't know anything about the damned war. Let's go to America. They only got in at the death. It was a joyride for them. They'll have forgotten it in six months, and, anyway, the country won't be rotten with it like this one. We'll be able to breathe there, and do things, and become human again! How about it, old man?"

Tom was staring into the fire. His hands, thick and calloused from an eternity of pick and shovel in the quarry, were clasped round one knee. When he spoke, it was as though he had not heard Dick.

"I am lost in admiration at the simplicity of your method, Gov'nor! It's as direct as a law of nature and has a touch of the same magnificence." He paused, then shrugged his shoulders and went on. "If I were a Savonarola, I don't believe I could say anything that would make any difference. It's beyond us both. We are not the same kind. You happen to be gregarious. I don't. Therefore we see it in such different terms that I doubt if I can even explain to you what I mean."

Sir Thomas gave a little sniff. "I should appreciate your trying!" he said.

"Very well," said Tom. "I will! Madge was right. You don't haggle about the price. Why should you? You don't know what the price is, and

you don't know what you are getting for it. This is how I would define it. You are trying to buy back the right of kowtowing to the herd, a right which you think you have lost because of me. You want the protection of being one of the crowd, a shadow among the other shadows, indistinguishable from the rest, but enjoying your own entity in the whole pattern. That's human and, of course, right, because it's so utterly biological. You are the kind that keeps the race on this earth, — and assuming that the race is worth all the fuss that we make over it, then I suppose what you propose to pay is not too much, that no price is too much. But there I differ with you. What you are paying, to my way of thinking, is the one thing that life is for, the only justification for the race going on, — and that is the faint stir of desire to stretch out a little farther, to understand and pin down the truth that is always just beyond our reach. As I see it, that is our one birthright, and all the rest of our make-up is nothing but a cloying mess that we have to spend our lives in emerging from, — inertia and fear and passion and all the rest. Until the war came and stampeded you, you didn't know that there has always been a quarrel between your kind and mine. But that opened your eyes, for the time at least. Because I wasn't stampeded, you called me a pacifist and were afraid of me. And it wasn't that I talked peace. That was merely a pretext, a recognition of the difference in kind. You were afraid because I dared venture a fraction of an inch outside the prescribed momentary boundary line of thought and stay there. You were angered because I refused to play with the other shadows, and was therefore an outsider, dangerous,

suspect! . . . As far as you and I personally are concerned, Gov'nor, it is you who are the pacifist and not I, for by pacifism you mean your own mental and physical peace at the price of sticking to the herd. I don't blame you. It was entirely conscientious; but while you were comfortably sticking, I had to go out and fight like the devil to keep alive in me the germ of desire to stretch out which happens to be mine. Neither of us deserves either blame or credit. We can't pick and choose our equipment for life before we are born, and therefore it's just a matter of chance whether one is an outsider or not. That's why the joke's on us both, when you think of Dick! He starts out by playing your herd game, and plays it well, too; but he's ended up by being on my side! You've lost him, Gov'nor! In the middle of the slaughter the spark was born in him! It would die again if he didn't nurse it and fight you for it, but I think I know Dick. He'll fight! And for all we know, there may be a million more Dicks. So it's a question whether your war was not more childish than our protest!"

With a gleam of amusement in his eyes, Tom rose and walked across to his father. "My dear Gov'nor," he said, "I apologize for talking my head off. You gave me such an extraordinarily good opening! Let's forget that—offer—of yours, shall we? Let's agree that you never made it!"

Sir Thomas shrugged his shoulders. "I'm glad you have the grace to apologize for all that high-falutin," he said. "To a college professor it may be an interesting subject for discussion; but, speaking as a man of the world, I confess that I am not greatly impressed. What you have said does not

seem to bear any relation to practical living. I see no reason for withdrawing my offer."

Tom nodded. "Parallel lines can never meet, eh? Well, at least you should know what my answer is. You too, Dick, old man, because in a way you're as far off as the Gov'nor. It's childish to talk of going off to another country. It's like Cain trying to run away from his crime. My crime consists in being a shade different from the rest. You can define that difference any way you like. The fact of my being imprisoned as a conchy merely underlines it, that's all. But, given the crime, it's simply begging the question to discuss this country or that. America, Germany or England, — they're only names, when all's said and done, for the same old brand of human nature. Such differences as language and geographical situation are entirely superficial. Unfortunately, from your point of view, like the chameleons we are, I happen to have absorbed the color of this particular country, and as a matter of individual preference it amuses me to stay here and watch things work out. From my point of view, there have never been greater possibilities in the whole course of history; and even though my position may be — what was your phrase, 'delicate and uncomfortable' — I'm afraid that does n't scare me enough to take any action about it!

"'Where I dines, I sleeps!' said Jorrocks, and I have most certainly dined these last few years, metaphorically speaking, right down to the savory, which consists in your telling me in so many words that it's worth a thousand a year to you to get rid of me! The sum is quite respectable and I appreciate the compliment. I suppose a Greek brigand reading the

price put upon his head feels much the same way! But I'm afraid my sense of self-respect would be severely cramped by the weight of your generosity, Gov'nor, so my answer is definitely — no, thank you very much!"

Tom came to an end with a friendly smile which, however, kindled no answering one in his father.

It seemed that Sir Thomas had come to the end of his resources. For several moments the silence was absolute. Then, a little white at the side of his nostrils, he said, "You . . . mean . . . that?"

Tom nodded. "Yes!"

Sir Thomas swallowed. "Very well!" he said. "I wash my hands of you! You can go to the devil in your own way!" He threw his cigar into the fire, in what was intended, perhaps, for a symbolic gesture, and marched to the door.

Madge piped up. "Before you go, Gov'nor! I'd like to remark that my allowance is hardly adequate to post-war conditions and if that thousand is going begging . . . "

The last words never reached their objective. Sir Thomas wrenched the door open and slammed it behind him.

As the door banged on the head of the household, the effect in that surcharged atmosphere was like the jumping of the cricket that starts the cyclone.

Dick went heavily to the window and pressed his forehead against the cold glass, staring out into the darkness.

"Oh, Christ!" he groaned, and went on in an inaudible mutter, "they're blind and deaf. They don't want to understand. It's all a waste and a sham. We've been through hell for nothing . . .

By God, if only the Germans had landed in this bloody country and shown them what war is, made them really suffer . . . "

His whole face became tight with anger, a cold, bitter resentment. Out there in the darkness he was seeing the dead faces of friends, cheery fellows who had dropped everything and sweated and fought in faith and hope until they had been disemboweled, buried alive, blown to bits, blinded, gassed, mutilated for life, — and all for nothing! Poor fools, cheated, tricked, bilked . . . and by their own fathers!

While Dick stood there with his face to the windowpane, his eyes a burning agony, Madge, all unmindful, jumped to her feet with an excited laugh.

"Great work, Tom!" she cried. "'Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian'! For a blinking conchy, that wasn't half bad! I've got to admit that there's method in your madness. But, for heaven's sake, do you believe all that stuff?"

"Honestly," said Tom, "I wouldn't blame the Gov'nor for scragging you to death! You deserve all the ninety-nine distinct damnations!" He laughed. "I've half a mind to put you over my knee and spank you myself! . . . Dick, old thing, as Benham's white-haired boy, do you think you could persuade him to bring in the whisky and soda? If ever I needed one, I do this minute!"

Without a word, Dick came out of the window. He crossed the room and pushed the bell button. As he took his finger off it, his mother came into his line of vision. The sight of her held him rigid.

Since her husband left the room, Lady Wickens had made neither move nor comment. She was so motionless that she was forgotten. But there she

sat, leaning back in her chair, the tears streaming down her face. They dropped from her chin on to her dress and were slowly absorbed by the material, like blobs of ink on blotting paper. Her face was not puckered. She was not sobbing. Her hands were quietly folded in her lap, but all the time the tears flowed and she made no effort to wipe them away.

"Mater!" said Dick sharply.

His tone reached the others and caught their attention. They stopped talking, and the same queer look of horrified disbelief came into their eyes as they stood staring uneasily at their mother.

Her lips opened. "It's all right, dear," she whispered.

None of them moved. All three seemed to be frozen, arrested midway, like horses wrenched back on their haunches. In their own respective ways each of these three loved her,—would have said so, at least; believed it, indeed. Each would have dashed in front of express trains to drag her back into safety, would have gone without food that she might eat. But in face of that passive grief, expressing itself only by that dreadful noiseless crying, they were appalled, embarrassed, self-conscious, ashamed of their ineptitude, guilty in that it did not touch them more deeply.

They began to look from one to the other, eager for some one to do something, say something. If she had been ill, they could have fetched a doctor, got medicine, carried her upstairs, expressed themselves in action. But this! . . .

Even Madge felt herself stultified, unable to bridge the gulf that lay between her mother and herself. With a note almost of impatience she said,

"Oh, buck up, Mater! There are no bones broken!"

"I'm sorry, dear," said Lady Wickens quietly. "Don't take any notice of me."

She had nothing to say to them, nothing to share with them. She was bankrupt, alone.

When Tom finally went across and leaned over her chair, she looked up at him with brimming eyes that scarcely saw him.

"Don't let it worry you, Mater!" he said. "It's one of those things that had to happen, and everything will be as right as a trivet, you see!"

Lady Wickens patted his hand, even smiled. "My dear," she said, "you've proved to me that I should worry less about you than the rest of us. Where did you learn it all, I wonder? It's queer, isn't it?"

The clink of glasses could be heard approaching in the hall. Dick strode to the door and opened it. "Take those down to the billiard room!" he said savagely.

Lady Wickens caught up the word. "Yes," she said, "I wish you'd all go down there and leave me."

Once more the three exchanged glances, — a little worried, hesitant, questioning, but with infinite relief.

"All right!" said Tom. "Good night, Mater!" He bent down and kissed the top of her head.

The others followed him and made their way with blundering quietness to the door.

As he was about to close it behind him, Dick looked in again. His mother had not moved. She sat there in the firelight, crying, crying . . .

With a face as hard as granite, Dick let the latch drop, turned away and flung wild impotent fists to the sky.

Chapter Eighteen

It was after midnight when Sir Thomas came in from his dressing room. Without a word to his wife, he placed a book on the small table between their beds, climbed into his own and turned on the reading light.

Lady Wickens had been waiting for him for more than an hour. She made no comment, however, until he had arranged the pillows to his satisfaction. Then she said, "Are you sleepy, Thomas?"

"Unfortunately, no!" he answered and picked up the book. It was one of those detective stories always guaranteed to induce slumber.

Lady Wickens hesitated. For some moments her hand played nervously with the nail buffer. Then she rose from the chair at her dressing table and went and sat on the side of his bed. Her eyes were still a little red.

"Put that down," she said. "I want to talk to you."

Sir Thomas knew that quiet tone. He put the book on his lap. "Oh, very well, my dear!"

Lady Wickens didn't begin immediately. Then she said, "I've realized something to-night that I've never been willing to admit before,—that I'm getting old."

"Nonsense, my dear! You . . . "

"Don't let's pretend!" said Lady Wickens. "It's true. We're both old."

Sir Thomas moved restlessly. "I don't think this is a very inspiring conversation!"

Lady Wickens smiled. "My dear," she said, "you ought to know by now that when I'm trying to tell you something I always have to lead up to it."

"Well, I call that a most unfortunate lead!" grunted Sir Thomas.

Lady Wickens made no appreciable pause, but her next approach was radically different. "You've devoted all your energies so furiously to work all your life," she said, "and been so successful, that you probably never paused to ask yourself if our relationship were going along as it should. But it won't altogether surprise you if I tell you that I feel as though I'd only been a sort of second string ever since the children were born. If either of us is to blame, it is more I than you."

Sir Thomas made no reply. He felt that he might betray himself by too cordial an agreement.

Having made her point, as she thought, Lady Wickens continued. "It's just that life took hold of us, and we didn't watch ourselves closely enough. Somehow or other, one just accepted the fact tacitly, —that while you had your career, I had my children, and that was what marriage meant."

Sir Thomas nodded. "Well, that's what it does mean!" he said. "You couldn't have given up your children, could you, any more than I could have left the city?"

"No," said Lady Wickens. "But all the same, we were wrong, both of us!"

Sir Thomas shrugged his shoulders. "Isn't it a little late in the day to waste time thinking about that?"

"Perhaps," said Lady Wickens. "It remains to be seen."

Sir Thomas looked at her searchingly. Then he said, "And what do you mean by that?"

"I mean," said Lady Wickens, "that to all intents and purposes, your career is over and that from this moment the children are definitely out of our lives. In a sense, you and I meet again after all these years. What are we going to do about it? What are *you* going to do about it?"

"My career over!" echoed Sir Thomas. "You . . ."

Lady Wickens held up her hand. "Now don't misunderstand me, Thomas! I'm not implying that you haven't many years in which you can still be most active in the city and from which you will derive a great deal of enjoyment. But I do imply that you have climbed to the top of the tree, and that henceforward you will only be resting on your oars." She smiled. "My metaphor got a little mixed, but, I repeat, what are you going to do about it?"

Sir Thomas had jerked himself upright. He appeared to be dumbfounded. "Do about it? What do you mean, do about it?"

"I want you to decide," said Lady Wickens, "whether you and I are to go on as usual, or whether, in view of the drastic change that took place in the family to-night, you are willing to make a drastic change too?"

There was a silence.

Then Sir Thomas said, "Really, my dear, you speak in riddles!" He was somewhat testy. "As far as what took place to-night is concerned, you've got to admit that I did my best to provide for that

boy and that he deliberately refused anything to do with it! No man could possibly have been more conciliating than myself!"

"I know, dear! I know!" said Lady Wickens. "You did your very best! And I was not referring to Tom at all when I spoke of a drastic change. I was thinking of Dick and Madge. This house has become too small for them. *We* have become too small for them. It's simply the war. There seems to be some peculiar thing about the war which changes the ideas of young people and settles the older ones deeper in their original convictions. I've only just begun to realize it. You haven't realized it at all, and that's why, in your dealings with the children, you come up against nothing but antagonism. This war has filled them with an unrest such as you and I never dreamed of in the days when we first met each other. Tom isn't the only one who's going. In a very short time you and I will be alone in this house. As I said just now, you and I are going to meet again after all these years, and I shall no longer have the excuse of the children, nor you of your career! . . . It's rather an odd thought, isn't it?"

Sir Thomas was thinking deeply. Finally he said, "What makes you so sure that the others are going?"

Lady Wickens spread her hands. "I don't know! I feel it in my bones!"

"Do you agree to their going?" asked Sir Thomas. "Can't you stop them?"

Lady Wickens smiled. "My dear," she said, "what happiness would there be in keeping two prisoners?"

"Well," said Sir Thomas, "suppose they do go! What then?"

Lady Wickens looked at him. "That," she said, "is what I want you to consider!"

"H'm!" said Sir Thomas. "I see! . . . Well, there's nothing very alarming in that, is there? We shall be able to jog along, I suppose! . . . You'll have your house to attend to, and so on; your friends and neighbors; a little more time for leisure . . ." He trailed off a trifle uncomfortably, moved the book from his lap as though its weight had become suddenly irksome.

Lady Wickens waited for him to go on. When he didn't, she said, "So you want me to go on being second string?"

Sir Thomas came back quickly. "Why, that's absurd! The house won't run itself! It seems to me that your importance will be in no way diminished."

Lady Wickens raised her eyebrows. "Need you deliberately misunderstand me? . . . For more years than I can remember we never seem to have had the same opinion about anything. We have always been on opposite sides of a brick wall, arguing back and forth. It has become a part of our routine . . . What Tom said to-night set me thinking. There's no reason why we shouldn't both try and be a little more intelligent than we have been! I've begun to try, and my idea is that if we change our routine we may succeed in changing our very stupid mutual attitude,—which is undoubtedly one of the reasons why we have lost the children . . . I should probably never have spoken like this but for what happened this evening."

Sir Thomas looked sulky. This conversation was twenty-five years late. "What other way do you suggest?" he said. "What other way *is* there?"

"I had hoped the suggestion would come from you!" she said.

"I'm sorry!" said Sir Thomas.

"Then I will tell you mine!" said Lady Wickens. "It seems to me there *is* another way, and a way which fits in with everything you've been arguing for months. It's something for you to think over very seriously, and I want you to promise not to answer at once. Will you?"

Sir Thomas shrugged his shoulders. "It seems to me very foolish, but if you insist . . . "

Lady Wickens accepted that as sufficient. "Very well," she said. "This is what I have in mind! You've said that because of Tom the people in the city might try and put you out of the Stock Exchange, and that if that were to happen it would be a terrible disgrace. Very well! Now, there's nothing further you can do there, except make a lot more money, and Heavens knows, you've more than you know what to do with already! I suggest, therefore, that the remedy is simple. Resign from the Stock Exchange, and leave your office! Don't you see that once you're not directly competing with anybody, no one will ever bother to think about you again, and you will be absolutely safe from further worry! Of course you've got to be employed. I can think of a hundred ways in which you can busy yourself! You can use some of the money to build a hospital for war wounded. You can organize a rehabilitation center. You can start a home for war orphans. It seems to me there are a thousand

things to do which will not only give you an infinitely fuller and more creative life than you have ever had, but will ensure you the lasting respect of everybody!"

Lady Wickens rose, observing that her husband was staring at her through narrowed eyes. "I venture to think," she added, "that that is a far more constructive program than for you and me to sit in this house like a couple of old fogies and get more and more bitter towards each other! . . . Now, I'm going to have my bath. — Remember that I don't want you to say anything about it to anybody until you have weighed it very carefully in your mind!"

She paused at the bathroom door. "It may be our one chance, Thomas!"

As the door closed behind her with a little click, Sir Thomas lowered himself back on to his pillow.

"Well, by God!" he murmured.

The book slid to the carpet with a soft thud. He paid no attention to it.

Chapter Nineteen

At the impact of a fact the human mind immediately starts an automatic process of secretion. If, at breakfast the next morning, there was no outward change in any one member of the family in relation to the others, it became clear that this process was in full action: that, as though a release had been touched, all five were once more "alertly intent upon their purposes."

No reference was made to any incident of the preceding night. The usual good mornings were exchanged briefly. Tom and Dick shared one *Times*. Sir Thomas had the other. As usual, Madge was late, and disgustingly cheerful.

Finally Sir Thomas folded his napkin with his customary precision and placed it in its silver napkin-ring. Completely sphinxlike, he announced to his wife that he had seen Benham and that "it was all right." He rose, adding that he would return at the usual time.

Dick dropped his part of the *Times* and rose also. "By the way, Gov'nor," he said quietly, "I sha'n't be here when you get back, so we may as well say good-by."

Lady Wickens' eyes went up to her husband's face. As plainly as words, her look said, "What did I tell you?"

Madge's laden fork paused on its way to her mouth, while she tried to read Dick's face.

Tom raised his eyebrows and seemed to be listening intently.

Sir Thomas was startled. "What do you mean —good-by?" he asked.

Dick shrugged his shoulders. "What does it usually mean?" he said.

Sir Thomas made no answer.

Dick's eyes were cold. "It means," he went on, "that I'm evacuating the position . . . clearing out! It means that we sha'n't have the pleasure of seeing each other for some little time."

Sir Thomas fumbled with his watch chain. "But . . . but what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to follow your advice to Tom," said Dick. "I'm going to America to see if I can't find a little decency, a little sanity, — things that don't seem to exist any more here."

Sir Thomas blinked and looked around the table. "Is he . . . Are you going together?"

"You heard what he said last night," said Dick. "I wish to God he would come!"

Tom pushed his chair back, gathered his long legs under him and got up.

"Thanks, old man!" he said. "That's nice of you. I'm sorry I can't." He turned to his father. "But I'm on my way too, Gov'nor, so you may as well give us both your blessing at the same time."

Lady Wickens broke in. "You're not well enough, Tom!" she said. "How can you possibly go to-day?"

Tom smiled at her. "You forget that you've been cramming me like a *foie gras*."

"That's all very well," she insisted, "but it takes time to get your strength back."

"I 've got all the time in the world, Mater!" said Tom, and turned to his father again. "You must n't miss your train, Gov'nor!" He held out his hand. "I 'll undertake to convince the Mater after you 've gone. Good-by, and don't forget that if you ever feel like looking me up some day when the war 's forgotten, I shall be honored and delighted!"

Sir Thomas looked from one to the other. He passed a finger uncomfortably between his collar and his neck, cleared his throat, said, "You . . . I . . ." and stopped. There was something wrong about this somehow, something peculiar.

As he stood there, baffled and puzzled, it seemed that the positions were reversed, that instead of his kicking them out, they were kicking him out.

Perhaps a glimmer of it filtered through, for suddenly Sir Thomas drew himself up, squared his shoulders. "Very well!" he said. "What must be, must be! I . . . I can only hope that it will be for the best!"

Gingerly he gave his hand to Tom and allowed it to be shaken, then passed it to Dick, who grasped it for a moment and dropped it so suddenly that it fell of its own weight.

"Yes!" said Sir Thomas. "Yes! . . . Well! . . ." He cleared his throat again, turned and marched out of the room.

No one spoke while he got into his coat and hat. They watched him go down the steps, nod to the chauffeur and climb, a little heavily, into the car. They saw the chauffeur lean in and spread a lap robe across Sir Thomas' knees, snap the door shut and, with much show of briskness, install himself behind the wheel.

Two brief funnels of blue smoke appeared at the exhaust pipes, and then the car rolled Sir Thomas most sedately out of the drive.

Madge sat back and crossed her pyjamaed legs. "The retreat was carried out according to plan," she said; "the Staff retiring in good order in face of a combined attack on both fronts . . . Any more coffee, Mater?" She shot a keen glance at her mother to see how she was taking it.

Apparently with the utmost calm, Lady Wickens took Madge's cup and busied herself with the detail of cream and sugar and pouring.

Dick turned to his brother. "Is there anything I can do to make you change your mind?" he asked. "In a sort of way, I 'd been counting on our kicking off together."

Tom shook his head. The two brothers looked at each other.

"Why not?" Madge asked the question that she knew Dick would never utter. She had her own reasons for asking it.

It was to Dick that Tom replied. "My dear old chap," he said, "we 've got to go this alone. Every one has. If we stuck together, we should merely cramp each other's styles. We 're both in the cart and all we can do is to stand up and take it!"

Dick nodded. "Oh, all right," he said. "I see! . . . I thought . . . Oh, I dunno! It 's a washout, anyway . . . I 'm going up to the club till I can get a boat. What are you doing?"

"I 'm going to try and get rooms in Little James Street," said Tom, "or Half Moon Street, or somewhere between the two, and see how I can fit in again. I may try for a job with the *New States-*

man. Or it might be worth tackling E. D. Morel. He thinks pretty straight and runs a good magazine." Tom shrugged his shoulders. "But I haven't really thought about it. Those are simply two vague possibilities on the spur of the moment . . . Look here, if you two don't mind buzzing off somewhere, I'd like to have a talk to the Mater."

Lady Wickens rose. "We'll go upstairs," she said.

"Righto!" said Tom. He opened the door for her. They went out together.

Madge put down her cigarette, went and closed the door, came back and stood in front of Dick. "Why the encircling gloom, old thing? You look as if you were going over the top!"

Dick gave a hard laugh. There was nothing left to do but clear out and it hurt most damnably. In a mute, unanalyzable way he had always loved England. The mere mention of Oxford brought a light into his eyes. London was a part of him. Before the war, the mere suggestion of leaving it all would have brought from him nothing but a Gargantuan laugh of ridicule. But in proportion to the war's searing him, so had he found each time he returned on leave that the civilian life and thought were more and more alien, completely without understanding of the truth. At first it had been a blessed relief, a thing to thank God for, a matter of infinite gladness that they were spared the knowledge. At the end, however, it appalled him. He had found himself wanting to ram it down their throats, to make them realize. Last night he had summed it up: "If only the Germans had landed in this bloody country and shown them what war is!"

His father and mother were pushing him out. England was pushing him out. Everything had gone back on him, had let him down, had lied to him. Even Tom refused him!

He dropped his elbow from the mantelpiece and half turned away from Madge. "My God!" he said. "I feel like it too! The whole damn game's a washout!"

Madge caught hold of his arm. "No, it's not!" she said. "You're going to America,—and I'm coming with you! We'll show 'em!"

For a moment Dick stared down unbelievingly into her excited eyes.

Madge's chin stuck out aggressively. "You and I are the only ones in the family who can help each other!" she said. "If you go off there alone, in your present state of mind, God knows what you'll do! You need some one to hang around, to be there, to curse with. And if I'm left here, they'd probably have to put me in a straight jacket in about six months! For any sake, let's push off together!"

Dick opened his mouth, but Madge was not to be stopped. She was keyed up, taut.

"You won't have to worry about me as far as expenses are concerned," she went on. "I've got a certain amount of cash, and the Gov'nor'll have to go on paying my allowance. We'll pool our resources. And it's all right, as far as the Mater is concerned. I've been thinking that over. We sha'n't be leaving her alone with the Gov'nor. We shall be leaving her alone with her husband, d'you see? Her point of view about him isn't ours, you know! And it's extremely likely that our departure may clear the air. Not very flattering to us per-

haps . . ." she laughed . . . "but when you come to think of it, the only friction that ever occurs is about one of us, or all of us, as the case may be!"

"By Jove!" said Dick. "I hadn't thought of that! I wonder!"

"There's no argument about it," said Madge. "Old people can get along together so long as there aren't any young ones to interfere and start egos bubbling. Then, too, did you see how she behaved just now? I'd bet anything that she's got all her plans cut and dried! So I'm coming with you, Dick!"

If there was a dogmatic finality in her voice, there was an urgent appeal in her eyes which never left his face.

Dick frowned, a little uncertainly. "It's jumping off into the blue!" he said. "What are you going to do out there?"

"The same thing that you are, — work!" The answer came pat, but for the first time her eyes flickered. She looked away. The color began to flood her cheeks. She went quickly across to the table and picked up the cigarette that was sending up a thin blue-gray spiral of smoke towards the ceiling. Instead of smoking it, however, she returned to her brother and faced him again.

"Look here, Dick," she said. "I'll be bone honest with you . . . D' you remember asking me in the car that day if any one of the six men who proposed to me meant anything?"

Dick nodded.

"D' you remember that I said one of them did?"

Dick nodded again.

"Well!" said Madge.

"Well, what?" said Dick.

Madge glared at him. "Damn it!" she snapped. "Can't you get anything through your thick head? . . . He's out there!"

"A Yank?"

"Yes!"

They remained looking at each other for several long seconds. The girl's amber beads throbbed to the pulse in her throat.

"Well?" Her tone was like the crack of a whip.

A shadow of a grin flickered over Dick's face. "Madge, old girl," he said, "you're a stout feller! . . . I'm damn glad you're coming!"

Chapter Twenty

FOR the first time in a number of years Sir Thomas did not open the *Morning Post* as he sat in the train on the way up to town.

There was a gleam in his eyes, and from time to time he shifted nervously on the upholstered cushions. With one hand he kept on twisting and untwisting his watch chain.

"So my career is over, is it?"

Alone in the compartment, he made the remark aloud, and his smile broke into a chuckle, as though the idea contained some element of humor that was most subtle and pleasing. From his pocket he drew out two or three letters and a telescope gold pencil, — a present from his wife on his last birthday. Then balancing himself against the motion of the train, he wrote in capital letters on the back of one of the envelopes, "SIR THOMAS WICKENS, K.B.E., SEVERS CONNECTION WITH STOCK EXCHANGE."

For some moments he held it out and looked at it. Then he wrote again in smaller letters, "Announces intention of building permanent home for war mutilated." For a time he considered that; and then, underneath, in capitals again, wrote, "GIFT TO THE NATION."

It was not merely the rocking of the train that made his hand shake.

Several stations flashed past while he stared un-

seeing out of window. In his mind he saw those words as the headlines of a column in the newspapers, and he was trying to follow their effect down the many channels of his business connections. Presently he held up the envelope again, carefully tore off the words "Severs Connection with Stock Exchange", and studied the rest.

"I wonder if that would do the trick?" he muttered. "The fact that that boy is out of the way will help, but upon my life I think Margaret put her finger on the spot! If I stay in, I may find myself worse off than ever, whereas if I resign it will give me a freer hand to go ahead with my scheme. And if I bring that off—"

He was still rubbing his hands with that queer gleam in his eyes, when the train slurred to a stop at the terminus.

If Lady Wickens could have seen her husband inscribing that envelope, it is not unlikely that her emotions would have been considerably stirred by such an immediate response to her appeal. It had been incredibly hard to make that appeal. That simple phrase, "It may be our one chance, Thomas!" had been the sole survivor of the wreck of her intended speech, and the effort that it cost her to get it out showed her more plainly than a hundred differences of opinion how immeasurably far apart they had grown. She told herself, as she closed the bathroom door, that she had failed, that their "meeting again", if it ever happened at all, could only be brought about by long and careful planning on her part.

The envelope would have completely deceived her. Far from being a tribute to sentiment, or even

a recognition that there was any justice in what his wife had said, the possibilities that Sir Thomas had penciled were nothing but an expression of his own fundamental ego; the seizing and adapting to his own need of something that she had no idea that she was giving him. Metaphorically speaking, it was as though sentimentally she had offered him a row of useless ciphers, and he had put a practical unit in front of them and made them valuable, — to himself.

In considering the possibility of resigning from the Stock Exchange, the farthest thing from his mind was the notion of his playing Darby to her Joan. In his own estimation, he saw himself in his prime, about to enjoy the triumph of his position now that the danger of attack on the score of Tom was considerably lessened. So at first the suggestion that he resign left him numb with stupefaction. Why not ask a man who has just been promoted to the rank of Admiral to resign from the navy, or a man who has just succeeded to Cabinet office to resign from politics, so that he may hold his wife's skein of wool while she darns? Preposterous! Unthinkably selfish! Ridiculous sentimentality! No man could be asked — et cetera.

Thus did he leap away from what to her was an appeal from the heart, and to him was something like high treason or criminal lunacy.

But then she had gone on to the further suggestion of building hospitals, — and at that moment he put the unit in front of the ciphers. He seized upon it as a chess player in a tight position suddenly detects a weakness in his opponent's attack and, by sacrificing a piece, crashes through it to victory.

Sir Thomas' possible sacrifice was resignation

from the Stock Exchange, — a move to which he had not yet made up his mind. But the subsequent moves were clearly defined.

The gleam in his eyes was one of ecstasy. He saw a great ceremonial being carried out— a group of ministers and generals gathered round the boyish figure of the Prince of Wales, who was laying the foundation stone of a noble pile which sprouted, as though by magic, among sweeping lawns which ran down to a river, shaded by the enormous trees of an old-world park; and there were bright-faced nurses, whose figures looked so girlish in their trim sweet uniforms, bringing laughter and happiness into the lives of those who had thrust their bodies between England and her enemies.

"Brayton Home, the generous gift of a super-patriot." He could see the newspaper reports. "The knightliness of Thomas Wickens, an example to his fellow countrymen" — "The thanks of the nation expressed by the Prince of Wales" — and then a little later, "It is a pleasure to note that in the Birthday Honours list of new Peers, Sir Thomas Wickens, K.B.E., who won the gratitude of the nation by his munificent gift of Brayton Home, becomes first Lord Brayton."

First Lord Brayton! And Margaret had said that his career was over! To what more distinguished career could any Englishman aspire? What higher reward for loyalty, for a life of devoted service to his country's cause, than to be deemed worthy to be elevated to the ranks of the aristocracy of that country?

As far as the K.B.E. was concerned, he had neither expected nor coveted it. But it was none the less the acorn from which the oak of the peerage

had sprouted, — forced, in a sense, by the pressure of domestic circumstances. It marked the turning point from the selfless dedication of himself to his country, to the camouflaged using of the country to help himself.

Naturally he did not admit that such was the case. He was thinking primarily of his gift to the nation, which should be magnificent, altogether worthy of the nation. Should it bring him a peerage, after perhaps a trifle of engineering — and the greatest minds in the country had amply demonstrated the value of discreet propaganda — the engineering was, after all, only a perfectly permissible nudge lest they forget.

But if Sir Thomas' mind could have been unwound for inspection, it would have been found that in all his planning and scheming for this building whose foundation stone brought such bright dreams, the mutilated for whom it was intended had no place. They were merely stage properties.

Sir Thomas was, indeed, alertly intent upon his purposes, — so alertly that his wife's voice, anxious though it had been, became as remote as the buzzing of a fly upon the windowpane; so alertly that he would have shrugged his shoulders, untouched and unbelieving, had Tom, or Dick, hinted that he was proposing to buy his new title with hard cash, cash which was, furthermore, sticky with blood; that he was proposing to use the mutilated bodies of men as stepping stones; that, in short, his honor was rooted in dishonor.

For him the future opened up a single vista, at the end of which he saw himself, Thomas Wickens, first Lord Brayton.

PART TWO

Chapter One

"THE girl's a peach, but he's too damned English!" Some one voiced the casual verdict of the smoking room as the liner nosed her bellowing way through the riffraff of barges and ferryboats, and the May sun was tossed back from the windows of Manhattan like a shower of diamonds which were caught on the little slapping waves.

As if to bear out that verdict, Madge, surrounded by a group of girls and men, was having everything pointed out to her from the main deck. In her handbag was tucked a sheaf of cards whose addresses and telephone numbers offered her an *entrée* to almost every State in the Union.

In after days some of those cards would seem more vivid than photographs: that one, for instance, formed itself into a corner of the boat deck, with the moon spilled all the way across the quiet sea, like milk on velvet, and the nice little boy from Chicago had become quite angry when she said that she would be a mother to him! And this other proclaimed its owner the vice president of a concern whose stockings she was wearing at the very moment when he danced her out of the lights and tried to kiss her . . .

What girls there were on board had all contributed to that sheaf of cards, however. Madge played with both hands.

Presently she broke away from the group with the

excuse that she was going to grab her camera and would be back in a jiffy. Instead of going down, however, she went up, two at a time, and made her way out on the deserted bridge deck.

Dick stood there alone. Pipe in teeth, he was staring out at America as represented by millions of black dots squirming in the slitlike ravines that honeycombed a thousand stalagmites.

The mere sight of it was as heady as a cocktail. Everywhere the stalagmites were tipped off with feathers of steam, as though, down in their bowels, things were bubbling, seething, lashing, molten, white-hot. Dick felt the tingle of it go right down to his toes. It looked as if a puff of wind might blow the whole thing down like a pack of cards, and, because of that, it was magnificent in its daring. The Egyptians had left the Pyramids; the Romans the Colosseum. Would these American colossi be standing three thousand years hence?

Madge came up and leaned on the rail beside him. Somewhere in there was Ted Baird. "Just look at it!" she cried. "Did you ever see anything to touch it? Lord, I'm glad we came!"

"It makes me feel devilish humble!" said Dick. "Suppose they don't like us?"

"Oh, rot!" said Madge. She smiled. "If the people on board are any indication . . . In any case, what does it matter? We're here! It's doing things! It's finding out! . . . Why, look at the start we've made! We've already got friends all over the country . . ."

"You have, you mean," interrupted Dick quietly.

"All right then, *I* have!" said Madge. "And you would have too, if you'd leave the war where it

belongs — three thousand miles behind! You 've *got* to buck up, Dick! It 's perfectly devastating to see you mope round the decks as if you were responsible for the whole thing. Anybody 'd think you were the Kaiser!"

In spite of himself Dick laughed. "Is it as bad as all that? I 'm sorry!" he said. "But you know, old girl, these people on board do make me feel like the sole survivor. They 're awfully nice and so on, but as far as any one of them is concerned, there might never have been a war! And do you realize that it 's barely four months since I was demobbed?"

"I know," said Madge; "but what of it?"

"What of it?" repeated Dick. "Lord!"

For hours each day of the crossing Dick had marched up and down the decks with his hands behind his back, trying not to think; had stood, face to the wind, staring out at the jade-and-white sea, feeling intensely the wonder of the sun that touched him with a warm hand, watching with a catch in his throat the leaping of porpoises from the creamy wave tops, tingling to the lift and drive of the ship as she peeled the water from her bows as a carpenter's plane peels thin curls of wood.

Sea, sun, sky and wind, — the elements calling to the youth of him . . . and yet, what right had his muscles to tighten in response when they were all dead over there? Dead for what, when the sun still made the world blaze and those jolly little beggars of porpoises were having such a good time playing leapfrog? . . . Why were they dead when everything was going on; when he, God help him, stood there feeling strong enough to rip the rails out of the ship and chuck them a mile into the

ocean? What right had he? . . . Why had it taken Jimmy Hillyard an hour to die with half his face shot off? Why had old Gibson been taken away, gibbering with shellshock? Why had Corporal Brown screamed once, like a rabbit, and stared at his handless arm? Why was the sea so lovely and everything so damnably and achingly beautiful? And why did he feel such a swine to be loving it all, and hating it all? . . . What were they doing about it? What was *he* doing about it? What *could* be done about it? They went into the smoking room and drank whiskies and sodas and talked money and markets. The deck chairs were full of yards of silk stockings, and eyes that knew it all, and mouths that yapped incessantly. And poor old Tom was breaking himself on the wheel in that bloody London, while *he* was trying to escape it all by coming to America! As if it could possibly be escaped? The whole world stank of death, — and people were holding their noses and turning their heads the other way. He, too, was shirking, damn him! He was going to fiddle about with automobiles for the profiteers to ride in! He was going to earn a living — comic thought! — to get up in the morning and do meaningless things all day and go to bed at night and sleep — like a clockwork toy all wound up. He could n't stop himself any more than they could. He could n't laugh properly because there was n't any laughter left in the world and it hurt too much. And he could n't cry at all because he was too damned English and they 'd think he was crazy. And what was the use of either, anyway? There was nothing to believe in any more . . . In an hour they would be in the streets of New York. If it had been Tim-

buktu or Buenos Aires it would n't have made any difference.

And all Madge could say was "What of it!" He turned to his sister and took her in, from the cocky little toque slanted over one eye, to the amber beads on the green silk frock, and down to the high-heeled suede shoes. "You 're a queer bird!" he said. "It did n't touch you at all. I wonder why?"

It may have been the remark itself; perhaps it was something in the tone. Whatever it was, Madge interpreted it as contempt, superiority, and rounded on him.

"I suppose you think you have a monopoly, do you?" There was a flush of anger in her cheeks. "I suppose you think I ought to limp round too, like a dying duck in a thunder storm? Was it my fault that you fools of men wanted to wallow in blood for four years? Do you think I enjoyed that hospital? Do you think I can ever get the filthy taste of it out of my mouth? Do you think I liked the agony of it, and the beastly animalism? . . . I went in knowing nothing, and I came out knowing too much, — about all of you, about myself! Thanks very much, I 'm going to try and forget it, all of it! I 've done my crying! I 'm going to grab every minute that 's left and make it mine! Mine, do you hear?"

She broke off short, turned quickly, and ran down the deck.

Dick stared after her. And at that moment the ship's nose began to turn in towards the pier.

Chapter Two

MADGE's enthusiasm for New York burned like a flame. Two of her shipboard friends, both girls, continued the friendship. One of them in particular, Dorothy Hancock, who had been studying art in Paris till the war broke out and then had given herself furiously to canteen work, helped Madge to find an apartment and warned her against the band of robbers who called themselves real estate agents.

The other girl was a member of the Junior League and fully conscious of the fact that she lived in the East Seventies. That both Madge and Dorothy should have chosen to live down in the Village, therefore, was beyond her toy-dog imagination. They might just as well have been on Ellis Island with the immigrants. After a couple of lunches at her club the budding friendship drooped, withered and was no more.

There remained Dorothy, a demure little redhead whose escape from New England had been only physical. Her inhibitions spoiled every one of her canvases. It was the more pathetic since she was convinced that she was too cosmopolitan, too bold, — did n't Paris and Greenwich Village prove it? But the heritage of primness and self-satisfaction yielded, however reluctantly, before the force of Madge's virility. There was nothing she would n't do for Madge. And as for Dick, — Dorothy's velvet eyes became veiled when she thought of him.

She installed herself in a studio in Washington Square. It boasted a north light, which no window cleaner could reach; an open fireplace that would allow nothing more of a fire than a gas log; and a ladder staircase that was a neck-breaking affair leading from the studio up to a balcony, out of which a door led into a diminutive bedroom that would only take an army cot, and a bathroom with a tub so small that her knees had to be tucked under her chin when she got into it. The stately old mahogany furniture with which she filled the place cried aloud of angular New England spinsters, shocked and outraged at finding itself in such surroundings, Puritans dragged into Bohemia.

Madge, realizing intuitively their relative positions, took Dorothy under her wing, criticized equally her paintings, her arrangement of furniture and her approach to life, and generally, as she herself phrased it, " bullied her for her own good."

This enslavement of Dorothy, together with the novelty of keeping house for Dick and the excitement of exploring, of making an ever-widening circle of acquaintances, of adjusting herself to entirely new conditions of living, were amply sufficient to keep Madge up to concert pitch. And all the while she was hugging to herself the secret thought of Ted Baird just outside it all, just round the corner. Like an epicure, she played with the delicious titbit, delayed going out to find him, in order to enjoy the suspense. She was like a Cinderella who knew all the time that it was her foot which fitted the slipper, and that when she raised her little finger the Prince would come running.

It was Dorothy who told her that the head-

quarters of the New York regiment were at the Armory on Park Avenue, and who choked with curious questions when Madge demanded to be taken there and shown the huge red brick building at which she stared with a private little smile.

"Now," said Dorothy firmly, "perhaps you'll tell me why I am dragged up here!"

"*Après la guerre finie* . . . " hummed Madge. Then she tucked her arm in Dorothy's and said, "Let's walk back and look at the antiques in Madison Avenue!"

"You're a horrid, insular thing," said Dorothy. "Who is he?"

Madge laughed. "Curiosity killed the cat!"

"Iceberg!" said Dorothy. "Was he a case of yours?"

"Speaking medically or slangily?" queried Madge. "Suppose you tell me what you think of Dick?"

Dorothy's eyelids fluttered. "Dick? . . . I . . ."

"Very interesting!" said Madge. "Go on!"

"I don't know what you mean!" snapped Dorothy.

"Do you think he'd make a good husband?"

"Why ask me? I . . . I haven't ever thought about it."

"Iceberg!" laughed Madge. "My dear," she added, "if you only knew how I envy you that blush of yours! It makes you look like an illustration from 'Cranford.'"

Dorothy gasped. "You make me so mad, Madge Wickens, I never want to speak to you again!"

Madge squeezed her arm. "Perhaps in a few

days the Armory may come down the Village. I 'll introduce you! "

Two excited, friendly eyes swung up to Madge's.

" Why, Madge! Are you . . . are you going to marry him? "

" He asked me to, once! "

" Why did n't you? "

Madge laughed unevenly. " Oh . . . because the moon would n't stand still. Because I was a fool and the war got into me . . . I don't know! "

" And now? " pressed Dorothy eagerly.

" Now? " Madge looked at her. " You know what war was, — a little. I may have been just an impulsive moment to him, the leave feeling . . . you know! He may not even remember me when he first sees me. But give me five minutes, that 's all! "

The two girls came into Madison Avenue and proceeded to glue their noses to windows behind which were frightful temptations in the seductive form of old pewter, old jewelry and amber, old furniture, — eye-catching bric-a-brac from every part of the globe. Dorothy coveted them all.

But Madge was filled with an inward gloating. She would n't have accepted the contents of all the windows in the avenue in exchange for that five minutes.

On the table lay an unopened letter.

The windows and doors were wide open. The drone of the electric fan was like a far-distant aeroplane. Its moving arc stirred the flowers in the vase on the writing desk, then fluttered the edges of the tablecloth, toyed for a moment with Madge's

bobbed hair, went on to finish its half-circle at the end of the sofa and then started back again.

A sweet, sticky, and not entirely unpleasant smell pervaded the atmosphere. It emanated from across the way, where a brass plate on the corner building told of the manufacture of "essential oils",—a term that intrigued Madge every time she passed the building on her way to, or out of, the apartment.

Down in the blazing street the soft incessant thudding of a ball against the wall of the house was like a muffled pulse beneath the shrill sparrow-like chirping of Italian children, whose cries were blotted out from time to time by the roar and rumble of huge trucks, the passing of which sent tremors through the legs of the furniture and made the house itself shudder.

Suddenly hoarse factory whistles blew the announcement that it was midday and, before they had finished, the cheap, tinny bell of the convent round the corner began ringing the Angelus.

Out in the small courtyard behind, in which a sawed-off tree trunk and a line of limp wet underclothes did little to invite the eye from any one of the fifty back windows, the usual Saturday cacophony had begun. A radio, a parrot and two gramophones competed with different offerings at the same time. Through it a girl, utterly undisturbed, practised vocal arpeggios; and from time to time an irate man in another apartment gave a grotesque imitation of her in a stentorian bellow. Evidently, however, the girl believed in her inalienable right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. She was impervious to hints.

Madge was sitting staring at the letter, her hands

clasped in her lap. She had been doing just that ever since it came, half an hour before. Presently she came back to earth, sponged her face with a tiny handkerchief and glanced at her wrist watch. As she looked up again, an expression of violent irritation came over her face.

"Oh, damn that caterwauling!" she muttered, and went into the bedroom and shut both windows with a slam.

The irritation, however, was still visible when, a little later, she went into the kitchenette and began digging in the icebox. Almost savagely she dumped things on the table in the front room, — cold beef, pickles, bread, butter and a bottle of milk. Then downstairs the front door slammed, and, a moment later, she heard a key feeling for the lock of the apartment door.

Dick came in. "Hullo!" he said. "Warm enough? . . . I think I'll just stick my head under the cold tap before we eat. . . . What would n't they give in England to borrow some of this sun? How about our getting the car and buzzing up into Connecticut somewhere for the week-end? We might shoot a little golf."

By the time he had finished speaking he was in the bathroom with his coat and collar off and his sleeves rolled up. Apparently he did n't notice that Madge made no answer, but when he came and sat down at the table, his head as sleekly wet as a water rat, he repeated the question while helping himself to cold beef.

Madge shrugged her shoulders. "Oh, I suppose we may as well," she said.

Dick took a quick look at her. "All right . . .

By the way, I found another letter from Tom at the office this morning. He 's on the staff of the *Forerunner,* parliamentary reporter, or something. Sounds like a ghastly job, but he seems to like it. Lord, when one thinks of the moldy time he must have gone through! I hope it means something worth while."

He poured out two glasses of milk and passed one over to Madge with another swift inquiry in his eyes.

"Incidentally," he went on, "you know those designs of mine — the changes for next year's model — I took them in to the vice president this morning. The old boy was tickled pink apparently. Asked me all about my racing at Brooklands and so on. If the board gets as excited about them as he did, we 'll be on velvet one of these days. 'The car that made good overnight,' eh?" Dick laughed and helped himself to more beef. "Queer how things go, is n't it? I suppose I ought to be frightfully cheered . . . career in capital letters and all that stuff! But there 's absolutely no kick in it. It 's merely funny."

He went on with his lunch. Odd that she had n't interrupted him! She was n't eating anything, either, — merely playing with a fork.

With quite unconscious deliberation, Dick drank down his milk, used his napkin, folded it, pushed back his chair and went to the mantelpiece for a cigarette, casting round for an opening.

Madge gave it to him. She dropped her fork with a little clang. "Chuck me one!" she said.

Dick took the box to the table and held it out to her. "Anything I can do?" he said quietly.

Surprised, Madge's eyes went up to his, antago-

nistic, resentful at his intrusion. Instinctively she hit out. "Yes, give me a match!" she snapped.

Without a word, Dick struck a match, held it while she thrust her cigarette end into the flame, and walked back to the mantelpiece again. "What about Westport?" he said casually. "It's a nice course and not too crowded. Jennings said we could use his name any time."

Madge walked over to the window and stood looking down, tapping the ledge nervously with her fingers. Finally she turned into the room again, tight-lipped, holding on to herself desperately. She picked up the unopened letter and held it out to her brother. "Look here!" she said.

Dick took it. It was addressed in Madge's aggressive handwriting to Lieutenant Edward Baird at the Armory on Park Avenue. In one corner Madge had written "Please Forward!"

"The Yank!" thought Dick. "Good!" And then his eye went to the other corner of the envelope.

In a male hand was scrawled, "Unknown. Return to Sender."

Chapter Three

WHILE Dick, on the strength of several letters of introduction brought from England, had been lucky enough to get a job with the Washington Automobile Company within a few weeks of landing, Tom had found London a very much harder nut to crack.

During many weeks, wherever he went, up one side of Fleet Street and down the other, the few men at all interested in him as a possibility had happened to drop casually in course of conversation, "Just demobbed, I suppose?" and when Tom, equally casual, replied, "No, I was a conchy," their faces took on a look almost of horror, as though he were contagious, as though he had named aloud something unmentionable.

The only one who remained undismayed was the editor of the *Forerunner,* a labor daily. He had looked at Tom with a shrewd smile and said, "There will be more of you in the open soon! . . . Sorry I have n't a vacancy just now. Drop in occasionally. There may be something later. Meanwhile, if you 'd care to waste your time with a little book reviewing . . . ?"

So Tom at last went back to his bed-sitting-room in an alley off Glasshouse Street with what he called a toehold. His reviews, always ruthlessly cut down, were liked. They began to appear regularly. On two occasions he had an article accepted. It encouraged him to work up a series of Imaginary Dia-

logues, in which the ministers of the various countries laid their cards on the table and told the truth. The editor of the *Forerunner* accepted four of the first six, and wrote suggesting more.

When they finally appeared, one each day for twelve days over the initials T. W., they were widely attacked by the coalition press, quoted by a Labor Member amid protests and cheers from the House, and were then immediately and utterly forgotten.

But in the solitude of his bed-sitting-room, Tom Wickens drew a long breath. Here were possibilities. "Perhaps by much sweat and fasting," he said to himself, "I may one day succeed in writing something!"

Whereupon, having no one to talk to, he sat down and wrote a long letter to Dick, — the first of many. Having told him of the Dialogues, he went on:

"D' you remember cursing the muddling old fools on the Staff who, as you so colorfully put it, 'trundled their fat bellies and immaculate boots round Montreuil like so many leading men in a musical comedy'? It's the same breed that's running the country now, and, for that matter, not just this country, but the world. So you see, old man, that compared to the rest of it, war is only a pinprick! In '14 it was perfectly correct to label me a conchy against war. As I see it now, I am a conchy against civilization, — or at least what we are pleased to mean by that much overworked word. All it means now is nothing but a very local boast on the part of certain peoples that they have shaken off the primeval slime and have acquired what they like to call culture! . . . Have you ever studied a map of the globe? That'll show you how local it is.

"By far the largest part of the earth's surface is what we call uncivilized, or, in the correct jargon of the day, backward. The humor of it is perfect! The other peoples are backward because, whether out of wisdom or stupidity, their dreams are not so prominently concerned as ours with power and conquest, because they have no means of withstanding us. On the delightful pretext of what is still shamelessly called 'the white man's burden', of showing them culture, of bringing them up to our own wonderful moral standard, we exploit them with missionaries and machine guns — both highly lethal! — and reduce them to impotent political and economic slavery. And it is the same slavery, mark you, although on different terms, from which we are unable to find the way of escape, and out of which has grown this bloody shambles that has left our comic civilization tottering!

"Our job is to change all that. Somehow or other, in the course of centuries, we 've got to slough off the philosophy which has led us down the wrong trail. How can we expect to end war, even, till we do that? War is an inevitable and comparatively insignificant incident resulting from our false hypothesis of conduct. Why, my dear chap, the millions of corpses that you 've left in France will make as little difference as a child with a tin bucket can make in the ocean! Don't fool yourself that your Lloyd Georges and Clemenceaus have changed their spots. They 're unimportant, anyhow. If there 's any hope at all, it lies in the periodic revolt of great minds. The progress of mankind — if any — is over the dead bodies of its conscientious objectors, from Confucius and Christ down to the smaller fry like

Darwin, Zola, Romain Rolland and Woodrow Wilson."

It was one thing, however, to theorize about human conduct, and quite another to compete with its personal application. Not to put too fine a point upon it, the bed-sitting-room was damned lonely.

For all his claims to non-gregariousness, the need for something more in the way of companionship than the replies of waiters from whom he ordered meals, and comments on the weather from the man of whom he bought tobacco, became imperative.

The few survivors among his old friends looked at him, when they met him in the street, with the self-conscious eye of survivors. They were better men than he; and they proved it, to their own satisfaction at least, by crossing over to the other side of the street or staring right through him.

On two occasions he was rash enough, goaded far enough, to accept invitations to dine with new-found acquaintances made through his contact with the *Forerunner*. At the first house it became apparent after a very few minutes that word about him had been passed round. The other guests talked down to him from the serene height of their conscious broad-mindedness, until Tom could stand it no longer and left on the flimsiest of excuses.

The other emergence from solitude was even worse. He found himself introduced as a "conscientious objector, you know! Isn't he *wonderful!*" . . . and then he was lionized and asked to relate his prison experiences, special emphasis being placed on what they called his "interrupted sex life."

Tom made no excuse for leaving that place. He just walked out; and when, twenty minutes later, by

a not very odd coincidence, a little bob-haired street-walker said to him out of the corner of her mouth, "Hullo, dearie!"—Tom stopped in front of her and burst into a great laugh. "My God!" he said. "They're not fit to lick your boots!"

"Oh, rats!" said the girl. "You're blotto, George!" and passed on.

For many weeks already he had fought off the little nagging thought of the girl who had handed him the white feather. Involuntarily he had had to allot her a place in the memories of the immediately pre-war days which his return to London had revived. Raucous and bloated as the city was with the sediment stirred up by the war, sucked out of every nook and cranny of the empire, it constantly took him back a thousand years to that August of 1914, to that other self whose attention had been roused by a girl.

Intellectually he had turned that page in the prison camp, weighted it down with ridicule and contempt. But emotionally, it was doubtful if he had been altogether successful. His own biological vanity came into play; his sense of choice was at stake. He knew that if he never saw Helen Portman again, the memory of her would remain with him as the ghost of an unanswered question of self. And now that he was so utterly alone, he was surprised, annoyed, to find his mind playing with the thought of her. It was n't possible that she had altogether escaped suffering. Perhaps she had learned, matured. Perhaps . . .

"Why the hell do I bother?" he asked himself angrily. "I swore I never would. She 'll have obliterated me from her mind entirely. If she has n't she ought to have, that 's all! It 's just that I 'm a

weak fool. It 's nothing but morbid curiosity. Even in those days it was never more than a ' might be.' I was . . . interested. But, damn it, I want to know! Do I fool myself if I say that it 's only fair to her? Could she have thought out that feather and gone through with it if she ever meant to clap eyes on me again? Not possibly! Absolutely not! . . . So it comes back to my own infernal ego which won't leave me alone. I may kick myself, but I 'll settle it once for all! "

The Portmans lived in Grosvenor Square, and as Tom turned into Bond Street on his way to the house — the route that he had followed half a hundred times in the old days — he smiled at the contrast in his emotions. He had been so infinitely much younger four years ago; and to walk up the steps of the pompous old house and ring the bell had been the signal for lighting within him a sense of eager adventure, the perpetual voyage of possible discovery that youth brings to youth in the meeting of bright eyes.

This morning, as he came to the exact spot in Bond Street where Helen had presented him with the white feather, he stopped, pretending to look into a shop window. All he saw in it were the words, " You brainless little fool! "

" That was a rotten thing to say! " he thought. " Unintelligent too, because it showed her how much she had hurt . . . Curious, if any one did that now it would n't touch me. Is that something gained or lost? " He turned from the window and went on his way, answering his own query as he did so. " Both, I suppose."

As he came into the square, his eye leaped to pick

out the house in the opposite corner, and he smiled again at his involuntary surprise at seeing it unchanged. He glanced at his watch. It was half-past ten.

"They'll think I'm mad to call at this ungodly hour!" he thought.

It was not merely the spirit of tradition that took him past the house with nothing but a swift glance at it out of the corner of his eye. For finally he muttered, "Oh, come on! Get it over! *C'est la guerre!*" and he walked quickly up the steps without a pause and rang the bell.

In his mind rose a detailed picture of the sitting room to which he had always been shown, and would be now; of the curved staircase up which the maid would go to announce his arrival to Helen. Perhaps she had seen him out of a window! Was he going to be Tom Wickens again, or still a coward? What had the war done inside that house? He would know the instant she came into the room. The whole story would be written on her face . . . The door was opened by a maid whom Tom had never seen.

His tone unconsciously changed. "Is Miss Portman at home?" he asked, his muscles all ready for the step forward when the door should open wider and the maid would invite him to "step in."

But the door didn't open wider. The maid glanced at him curiously. She knew that he was an officer who had just come back from the war, even though he was in "civvies." Only officers had ever called there, and it was a part of her war schooling that one couldn't exceed one's duty to an officer.

"No, sir," she replied. "You mean Miss Helen as was?"

"Yes," said Tom.

"She 's married now, sir," said the maid eagerly. "Has been for over a year!"

"Oh!" Tom gave a little sarcastic laugh at himself. "I had n't heard," he said. "Thank you for telling me." He half turned.

But the maid, to whom this incident was a fascinating break in the routine, did n't want him to go. Her movie-trained mind leapèd to the possibilities of disappointed romance. "You 're welcome, sir!" she said. "She married an officer, and he 'd lost an arm too, and they live in the country now, sir, and . . ."

Tom stemmed the tide. "I see," he said. "Thank you!"

"Mrs. Portman 's here, sir, if you . . ."

"Oh, that 's all right," said Tom quickly. "I 'll probably be seeing them before long. Good morning."

Her answering good morning sounded only from the distance. Tom was already down the steps, walking rapidly. He did n't stop till he was back in the bed-sitting-room. He shut the door behind him and for a long time stood leaning against it, motionless. Finally he gave a sort of laugh and hung up his hat on the accustomed nail. "Well," he muttered, "now I can get to work!"

Chapter Four

To Dick, New York had been like a dream in which he was a vaguely interested participant, a parade that he saw dimly through serried ranks of ghosts. The only reality was Madge, and that because Madge was a part of that other life which had been lived before the war.

It was not he, Dick Wickens, who came walking down the Avenue, elbowed and jostled by a million women in the shopping district, shouldered and pushed by a million men at its lower end, until he came at last into the comparative quiescence of Grove Street, where shrill Italian children played eternally at ball. It was not he who went every day to an office on the twentieth floor of a building at Columbus Circle, who gave solemn good mornings to men with whom he worked and sometimes ate, but who were total strangers, living he knew not where, thinking he knew not what. It was not he who went round to Dorothy's studio with Madge, met young men and girls and sat and smoked, listening to conversations about books and actors, doings and beliefs, which were as without meaning as though he were a man from Mars.

It was some evanescence of Dick Wickens which had done those things, a wraith of himself that had gone on eating, sleeping, smiling, smoking, that had sometimes reached gropingly for Tom with pen and paper, that saw time pass as though he were not of it.

It was as though the real Dick Wickens had died somewhere, sometime, in France, — at that moment, perhaps, when his beliefs had been definitively shattered. The part of him that was in America was merely the husk, the shell, emptily awaiting the rebirth of his soul.

The sight of the returned letter brought him up almost as sharply as it did Madge. Up to that moment, although he had several times wondered if she had done anything about "the Yank", he had n't asked her. She was always so independent, so cocksure, so determinedly playing her own game. But when he saw that queer, savage look in her eyes as she held out the letter to him, and realized that she was "badly knocked", Dick's conscience suffered a violent twinge. In his own phraseology, he began to kick himself for a blind idiot. He felt that he ought to have realized that her jazzing about with Dorothy was really nothing but a method of marking time, a disguise for that outburst on the boat; that the various parties she had dragged him to at the studio were simply to camouflage the uncertainty of ever finding the American.

Once started, of course he dramatized it out of all proportion, although in all sincerity. He told himself what an enormous lot she meant to him, how she had taken everything out of his hands, found the apartment, run it, absolutely put them on their feet in New York, — and all the time he had been floundering in a mess of ego without once bothering about her. He was an ungrateful blighter, a dirty dog, and he would take a hand at once.

On the way out to Westport in the car he made monosyllabic inquiries as to her creature comforts,

fussed a little at dinner because she did n't eat much. The inn was a tiny but comfortable one, away in a lane, tucked off the turnpike. After a rather silent evening, Madge went off to bed early, leaving Dick to smoke a worried pipe out in the garden where myriads of fireflies dropped silent barrages all round him and the dry shrilling of locusts was like a million tiny buzz saws working overtime.

On Sunday they were out early. He waited till they had both driven off the second tee. Then he said, "I say, old thing! . . . This man, Baird."

They were walking in step down the fairway. Perhaps Madge's chin raised a trifle. Otherwise she made no sign of having heard.

"I think I might be able to help you find him," said Dick.

Madge swung viciously at a daisy. "How?" The query was very grudging, but at least it did not put a taboo on the subject.

Dick breathed with relief. "Well," he said, "there ought to be a Brass Hat somewhere in charge of records."

Madge snorted.

"He should know when your man was demobbed and what his permanent address is," said Dick. "It 's like that in England."

"Fat chance!" said Madge.

"There 's your ball," said Dick. "You seem to be away."

Madge used her brassie.

Dick whistled. "That was a lucky one! . . . You pressed like the devil!"

"Pressed!" Madge spoke between her teeth. "I only tried to knock the damn thing out of its cover!"

Dick nodded sympathetically, played his second, watched it trickle to the edge of the green, and then fell in step with his sister again.

"Are you sure his regiment was the 107th?" he asked.

"No!" said Madge. "It was Dorothy who told me it must be that."

Dick raised his eyebrows. "Not very helpful!" he said drily. "Do you know which division of ours he was attached to at the time?"

Madge glared at him. "I'm not the record office!" she said. "I don't know a thing! . . . All I can tell you is that he came to Etaples in May, 1918. I know he was in the infantry. He said something vague about being somewhere up in Flanders attached to us — you may know what armies were up there then — and that he belonged to what he called a New York 'outfit.' That is the sum total of my information, — if you can call it that!"

Inwardly Dick groaned. All too familiar with the ways of war offices, he felt that if it were not hopeless, it was bound to be a long hunt. When they reached the green, however, he tapped out his pipe on the face of his putter.

"It'll do!" he said firmly. "There weren't many Americans attached to us. I think the best thing would be for me to go to that Armory on 66th Street and find the adjutant or somebody. He'll be able to tell me at least which Brass Hat to write to, and where. I'll dodge over there to-morrow on my way back from the office . . . It's your putt. Let's see you sink it . . . Buck up, Madge, old thing! If he survived the show, we'll find him all right!"

Madge's face was rather white, tired-looking, but not for a million dollars would she have admitted that she cried herself to sleep the previous night. She smiled at Dick.

" Thanks," she said, " but I 'm not fooling myself any more. The thing 's a washout! From now on, I 'm going to do a job of work."

" Stout feller! " said Dick. " And you can leave the sleuthing to me! "

Chapter Five

In one or two letters Tom had asked what America was thinking and feeling about the war and the peace.

Dick had no more idea than could be gleaned from the headlines of the newspapers, according to which, naturally enough, it was beyond argument that America had won the war, practically single-handed. About the peace, the issue was not so clear cut. Nor was Dick able to gather any first-hand evidence. Of the people he met, some few were returned officers who had fought at Château-Thierry, or in the Argonne; but the only thing they would talk about was Paris. Of the war itself they had nothing to say; or, having it, refused to say it. It was as though they had either got nothing out of it, or else had discovered some great fact, some incredible secret, and were determined to keep it to themselves at all costs.

One evening, two of Dorothy's war friends found their way to the studio, women, one of whom had been with the Red Cross in France, the other running canteens in various parts of the back areas. They were only too ready to talk. They talked incessantly, and about nothing else. Mercifully for Dick, they were not in the slightest degree interested to know what he had or had not done. They were, very naturally, too full of their own emotional experiences. They had had a perfectly lovely time. And so, cornered in an armchair, he was forced to sit, with rage and despair in his heart, saying "Yes . . .

No . . . Really?" in icy politeness, while every adverb they spilled and gushed about "our heroic boys," and their own personal "reactions" to those "darling poilus" and "you wonderful English!" made him feel that he was going through internal hemorrhages.

When at long last they said good-by, Dorothy closed the door behind them and turned eagerly to Dick.

"You see!" she exclaimed triumphantly. "We really did do something to help! We had hundreds of women just like that, working themselves to death in France!"

Dick was white and trembling, on the verge of an outburst, but when he looked down at the well-meaning, earnest little red-head, he made a tremendous effort and drove himself back into the world of pretense which to them seemed reality.

"Did you?" he said. "How . . . how splendid!"

Whereupon Dorothy set about clearing off the tea things with an inner glow of satisfaction, while Dick, who helped her pile them in the kitchenette, was three thousand miles away in that limbo of upheaval, of agony, from which there seemed to be no escape.

The first faint impetus in that direction, however, came to him in the office. Among the men there was a lean, whippy young Irish-American from Providence, — one of the few who had not gone into politics; because, he said, his mother had wanted him to be a priest.

"I thought both jobs were the bunk and ducked out!" he explained to Dick. As far as the war was

concerned, that was "the bunk" too. "I don't know anything about the Heinies," he said, "never saw one! But the time I won the war was when I laid out a couple of the dirty English outside a London pub one night!"

His name was James X. Malone. He never wrote it in full, — perhaps because there had been several most pleasing occasions when would-be facetious acquaintances, not of the faith, had asked, "What does the X stand for, Jimmy?"

To which the Irishman delightedly replied, "Come outside and I'll show you!"

After the war, instead of going back to his home town, he had stayed on in New York where, at the instance of a political uncle who held a large block of stock in the Washington Automobile Company, he had been given an opportunity in that company's advertising department.

When Dick joined the concern, Malone looked him over each morning with an appraising blue eye in which regret was mixed with approval. "He's English from the spats up," he said, "but will you look at those shoulders!"

At last, towards lunch time one day, he took out a coin, matched himself and won. Whereupon he rose and strolled across to Dick's desk. "Say!" he said. "Did you generally win on a K.O. or on points?"

Dick looked up, somewhat startled, from a mass of papers. There was no mistaking the nationality of that cherubic countenance. He smiled. "Oh, I dunno!" he said. "I've been pretty lucky."

Malone considered. Apparently this bird was n't so high hat as some of them, he thought. "Well,"

he said, " there 's to be a rather promising little go at the Garden to-morrow night, — bantams. Care to take it in if I can get a couple of ringsides? "

Dick looked for a moment into two quizzical blue eyes and then, to his own astonishment, said eagerly, " Rather! That would be awfully nice! . . . Er . . . won't you come and lunch with me? "

Malone smiled. " The idea 's good," he said. " Let 's go! "

The following night, after dining together, they " took in " the fight. Dick found himself responding rather as a stray cat to the hand of a passer-by under its chin, — furtively wary, but longing to purr. He was amused at the Irishman's attitude towards life, his humorous skepticism, his amazing slang, his quiet but perfect independence: but underneath all that there was a quality that Dick could n't pin down and define. Was it something in the man's eyes, manner, mind? He did n't know, and, after a few vague puzzlings, did n't try to find out, more than content to yield to what the French call " an intuition of affection," — that queer magnetic current of personality that is sometimes switched on at the meeting of two individuals, however incongruous they may appear to be.

They talked incessantly: Malone naturally, Dick with a sort of hunger, as though released from a sentence of silence; and, after an elaborate meal, mounted two fat cigars and walked, shoulder to shoulder, still talking, down to Madison Square Garden.

Dick watched the fight in a state of excitement that had little to do with the merits of the boxers, and when, after it was all over, they had said good

night at the Flatiron Building, he whistled all the way down the Avenue. But as he reached the house he suddenly realized that he had actually told Malone — God knew why! — the whole story of his coming to America.

The realization caught him as he was in the act of putting his key into the front door. He went hot all over, stood there numb with shame, the sweat breaking out on his forehead, his clothes all feeling itchy.

"Good God!" he muttered. "What a bloody fool!"

The exhilaration that he had known all the evening oozed out as phrases came back to him that he had used about Tom, his father, himself, — and to a complete stranger!

"Who the hell is this man, Malone?" he asked himself. "Damn him, he had n't any right to get under my skin like that!" And he went up to bed, cursing himself for his weakness.

But James X. Malone was not Irish for nothing. All he talked about the next day was the fight, and his description of the fourteenth round, in which the champion dropped the would-be title holder for the count, kept the entire office in an uproar for an hour.

Before they had all settled down to work again, Dick's feeling of shame and antagonism had yielded somewhat, and he would even have been forced to admit to a sneaking feeling of relief at having told him. All the same, he did n't dare trust himself to be quite sure about Malone. The uncanny way in which the Irishman had got under his guard was rather overwhelming. Such a thing had never happened to him before. He did n't like feeling as

ignominiously naked as a snail hauled out of its shell, even though the hauling was not done by a pin, but by a process that was distinctly pleasurable. He told himself that it simply was n't done. He would wait a little and see how things panned out.

In the weeks that followed, when from time to time they did a dinner and show together, he merely told Madge that he was going off with "a chap at the office, rather a decent sort."

The morning after his return from Westport, however, a thought came to him that made him turn his head and stare across the office at Malone.

"If the Yank has disappeared, I wonder whether Madge . . ."

Chapter Six

For many days it seemed to Madge as though the bottom had dropped out of everything. She was the type that is always either very much "up," or correspondingly "down." The passive normality of most people seemed impossible to her. She demanded stronger meats, and unconsciously dramatized her whole existence. It was not in any sense a pose. It was simply the natural expression of tremendous vitality, the sort of high voltage that inevitably pushed her to the front in any lesser-charged average group, that made her, even when she was not talking or doing something, the one to whom the others addressed themselves, of whom they expected — and got — an immediate response.

She had been so perfectly certain that her letter would produce Ted Baird that, temperamentally, she flew to the opposite extreme the moment she found that it had n't. She told herself that he had disappeared, that she would never see him again, and that she was nothing but a sentimental little idiot ever to have thought of finding him. It did n't matter that Dick had been to the Armory and had written letters not only to the Brooklyn Regiment but to Albany. She herself had failed to find him: therefore he was not to be found· therefore life was empty, not worth a curse, and soon would be utterly unbearable if Dick did n't stop fussing and trying to be so damned sympathetic!

"What do I care whether Ted Baird is found or not?" she lied to herself. "If he can get along without me, I don't need him, thanks very much! He was never more than an excuse for me to get away from South Brayton, anyway! So I don't care! . . . I won't care!" And she flung herself away from the window of the apartment because those confounded children in the street would go on screaming to each other till one's nerves were on edge . . .

Now that her bubble was pricked, however, it was indescribably hard to come down to the humdrum level of every day, to face each morning for what it was, instead of facing it, as she had been doing, with the absolute conviction that she was the master of her fate, that at any moment she could spread her wings and fly. New York was no longer an enchanted city with romance round every corner. It seemed all at once just a city, crowded, hideous, tawdry, smelly, unnecessarily noisy, and without a lungful of clean air anywhere. She decided that the man who invented the "El" ought to have been shot; that the system of emptying ashcans outside the apartment window was absolutely barbarian; and that the way they bred children in this slum of a Village was disgusting, infamous.

Her wings were clipped. She was an earth mortal like the rest of her little world, — like Dorothy, who seemed to have something left out of her make-up so that it was impossible for her even to catch Dick's attention; like Dick, who was still living along in a sort of coma.

Like Dick! Madge stopped there and began to think. Dick's wings had been clipped all the time. He had never had the possibility of an outlet to buoy

him up. All the days had been just days to him, — and yet he had settled down without a word and was tackling them as they came . . . Something curiously like respect began to creep into her thoughts of him. She wished she could take back some of the sarcastic things she had flung at him. She began to have a dim perception of the depths of disillusionment from which he was trying to climb out.

"And I said that we were the only two who could help each other!" she exclaimed. "I'm just no damn good, that's all, to Dick or any one else!"

With that self-accusation she reached low-water mark, stayed there, submerged, for one endless miserable day, and then, with the inevitability of the changing tide, came rushing up to the surface again. Work! That was the program. She had told Dick that she was going to work. Her mind fastened on it eagerly, hungry for action. She would work till she dropped, — and make Dorothy work too! It was criminal the way that girl sat around and slacked. Dorothy could paint if she'd only go for it, sweat at it, — and she should from now on! She, Madge, would make it her personal business to see that things happened forthwith, practical things that showed results . . . For instance, what about their opening a shop together in Eighth Street, a cunning little devil of a shop with old English chintz curtains in the windows, and some lovely old prints on the walls, and she could make parchment lamp shades in all sorts of quaint shapes, and they could have pots and jugs and things, and at the window end of the shop Dorothy could sit and paint them in oils and water colors, and they could charge enormous prices and be frightfully exclusive, and people would

come down in expensive cars to see them at work, and it would be corking good fun, and they could have the place photographed and get some articles in the papers and really make a go of it, and . . .

Her imagination raced ahead, but Madge herself was not far behind. Within five minutes of having conceived the idea, she was flying down the stairs of the apartment and on her way round to the studio, — "up" again.

When Dick came home that night he heard excited voices before he opened the door and came in to find the two girls arguing decorations and color schemes. They had already found a shop.

"What shop?" asked Dick.

"*The* shop!" said Madge. "The one Dorothy and I are going to make the most chic in the whole of New York!" And she poured the idea at him, drowning out Dorothy's attempted interpolations and additions.

For many days Dick had returned to find her limp, inert, shut in. This galvanic return to high pressure told its own tale. He was most mightily glad; and if he did n't believe that there was anything in this new move — what did it matter? It was going to tide her over.

"Perfectly splendid!" he said. "I 'm all in favor of it! Have you signed the lease yet?"

"No, we 're going to to-morrow," said Madge.

"Great work!" said Dick.

"We want you to come round and see it to-night," said Dorothy.

"Of course!" said Dick. "But I suggest that we feed first. Where shall we go, — that little place with the garden?"

"Rather!" said Madge. "Come on, let's get our hats!"

Within five minutes they were on their way, the two girls squandering superlatives in every sentence, Dick, like a properly conducted chorus, coming in at the right moment with the proper questions and responses.

It had been their habit, as a change from kitchenette meals, to dine at one or other of the many eating places in the Village two or three times a week, and they had established the more or less permanent preference for the one which, for want of a name, they called the little place with the garden. It was a large room with oak tables and cubicles and copper trays on the mantelpiece, and out behind a garden with green things growing and colored lanterns. They liked it because not only did it meet the eye well but the stomach too.

They were only three doors away from it when Madge broke off in the middle of a sentence and clutched Dick by the arm, staring at the door of another restaurant through which two men had just disappeared.

"Don't let's go to the garden to-night!" she said. "Let's go in here!"

"Oh, no!" said Dorothy. "It's so much cooler in the garden and the last time we tried this place we hated it!"

She might as well have saved her breath. Madge had already swung the door open. Dick, with a puzzled eyebrow, caught it and held it for Dorothy, who shrugged her shoulders with compressed lips and followed in.

Madge's eyes were on the two men who were in

the act of pulling out chairs at the far end of the room. The light was none too good and she could n't see them clearly, but her heart began kicking and leaping against her ribs. There was an empty table next but one. Without a pause she led the way to it, pushed two chairs out of the way and made for the corner so that she would be facing them. Dick and Dorothy were right on her heels.

Madge thanked God that they cut off the other table from view as Dick stood and held a chair for Dorothy. She needed a moment's time to pull herself together, and bent her head over the menu.

"What on earth made you come in here?" demanded Dorothy. "I think you 're perfectly ridiculous! You know it is n't a patch on the other place."

"Oh, cheer up!" said Dick. "We 'll be looking at the shop in three quarters of an hour, and then it won't matter where we fed. Incidentally, where is it? You did n't tell me that."

As the others began talking, Madge sat with every muscle tight, her hands locked together in her lap, listening for a voice from the other table. At last she could bear it no longer. She raised her head, looked across between the two blurs who were Dick and Dorothy, — and saw him! She knew she could n't have made a mistake. Although she had never seen him in civilian clothes before, how could she possibly have not known the shape of him, the angle of the head?

Ted Baird had the menu in front of him. He glanced up and said something to his friend.

Madge did n't hear Dick say, "What are you going to order, old girl?" She did n't see him fol-

low the unanswered question with a quick look. She was conscious only of Ted Baird as he casually took in the room, his eyes going on a little voyage of exploration from table to table, as they had at Paris Plage . . . Would he remember her? Or would she, when those eyes reached her, be just another woman in the restaurant? Had he forgotten? Was this going to be a beginning or an end? If he recognized her, he might be merely polite, bored that she had turned up! If he didn't recognize her . . .

Their eyes met, for a second, casually. Ted Baird looked away again. Madge's heart stood still. The palms of her hands felt damp and cold.

"He doesn't even know me! He . . ."

Before she could finish her thought, however, his eyes came rushing back to hers, no longer casual, but searching, intent. His whole expression had changed,—went on changing as she looked. She could see him pass through shades of disbelief and amazement, uncertainty and bewilderment, as though by degrees things were falling away from him—the restaurant, the city, the present—and she smiled when she saw that he was back again in France with her name forming on his lips and herself in his eyes.

Ted Baird kicked away his chair.

Unaware that the shop was crumbling into ruins as she sat there, that great lightnings were crackling over her head, that planes of life were sliding and shifting around her, Dorothy was pouting her slightly discontented way down the list of things to eat, faced with the ultimate decision between chicken wings with rice and Yankee pot roast. She started as a man's shadow fell across her shoulder and an exultant voice said, "It *is* you . . . Madge!"

She saw Dick, queerly tense, rise and stand looking at the newcomer. She saw Madge's face, — and her own flamed as she knew that the Armory had come down the Village.

Madge unlocked her damp hands. At that moment she was in that central point of a cyclone which is dead calm. The sum total of her information was complete, not only of him, but of herself, not only for to-day, but for to-morrow. This was the beginning.

She held out her hand and, although all she said was "Hullo, Ted!" it seemed to be entirely adequate.

Chapter Seven

It was very pleasant in the cool of the autumn afternoon to sit in the angle of the thick yew hedge and listen to the bees as they tumbled from one flower to the next in the many-colored bed that ran halfway round the tiny pond. On a small island in the center of it Verocchio's chubby boy stood grasping his fish, balanced on one toe as though, having just made the capture, he was in the act of flying off with it. From the mouth of the struggling fish was squeezed a gentle jet of water which, in falling, was pushed this way and that by the breeze.

Between the flower bed and the water, old flagstones with mossy chinks made an inviting way to the triangle of lawn where Lady Wickens sat alone in a long wicker chair beside the now deserted tea table. A letter of many pages lay open in her lap.

Over her shoulder the slow-setting sun dropped its warm pattern of black and gold through the branches of the elms. It touched the flowers and made their velvet softness glow. And presently, as Lady Wickens dreamed on, it splashed over Wilson as she rounded the yew hedge and came stepping along the flags.

Lady Wickens watched her, and smiled as she caught the glint of gold on a finger of the girl's left hand. She waited until Wilson began to gather up the tea things.

Then she said, "I 'm glad to see that you and Brown have made up your minds, Wilson!"

There was no pause in the deft handling of cups and saucers. "Thank you, my lady!" answered the girl. "I don't think we ever should have if Mr. Dick had n't got him that job in the brickyards before he went away."

"Indeed?" said Lady Wickens. "Why, what had that to do with it?"

Wilson ceased her activities. "Well, you see, my lady," she said, "he was always saying awful things about the war, and how no one wanted a man with only one leg. He was terrible bitter. But now that he 's been working steady all these months, and knew that . . . that I was . . . sorry for him, why, he 's another man! I 'm that thankful to Mr. Dick, my lady!"

Lady Wickens kept a straight face. "I doubt if he had as much to do with it as you did, my dear! . . . Have you decided when you are going to be married?"

Wilson's color became as delicate as some of the flowers behind her. "He wants to be married at once," she said, "but as I tell him, we 're only just engaged."

"If you 're really certain about it in your own mind," said Lady Wickens, "I would n't put it off too long, if I were you . . . Is that the car I hear?"

Wilson peered round the corner of the hedge. "Yes, my lady," she said. "Shall I go and tell Sir Thomas you 're out here?"

"Yes, please!" said Lady Wickens; and, as the girl picked up the tray and went along the flags, she added, "How would you like the cottage next to the post-office as a wedding present?"

Wilson gasped and stopped. "Oh, my lady!"

"Think it over and let me know!" said Lady Wickens. "Run along!"

She picked up the letter, which was in Madge's slashing handwriting, and began arranging the sheets in order. At the sound of her husband's footsteps she looked up and met him with a question. "Well? . . . Have you bought it?"

Sir Thomas raised a deprecatory hand. "The world would be a different place if things were done as fast as that!" He touched her cheek with his lips and sat down. "No, but we opened negotiations this afternoon!"

"How long will they take to go through?"

"A week at least. Possibly a little longer."

"And will you be able to start building immediately?"

Sir Thomas smiled at her. "My dear, you are as impatient as only a woman can be! It will be months before any workmen set foot in the place. The plans are coming along splendidly, but they are not nearly finished yet."

Lady Wickens laughed. "Being patient about this, Thomas, is the hardest thing I've ever tried to do! When are you going to let me tell people? I don't see why you should go on hiding your light under a bushel any longer!"

Sir Thomas joined his finger tips. "My dear," he said, "when I first told you my plans, you promised to keep them secret! I can only repeat that it would cause me considerable embarrassment if it got out before the proper time, — and that time is not yet!"

"Very well," said Lady Wickens, "I'll go on

holding my tongue. All the same, I can't begin to tell you how pleased I am that you are doing this . . ." she glanced away, almost with a touch of shyness . . . "and proud!"

Sir Thomas looked round at the flowers and the sunshine and the gently falling spray, and, with those pleasant words ringing in his ears, allowed himself a moment's deep satisfaction.

It was a rarefied atmosphere that he had been breathing all that summer.

The day after Dick and Madge had sailed, Lady Wickens had listened with amazement to her husband's announcement that he had decided to adopt her idea and build the Home. To her it was the "outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace." In complete ignorance of any wheels within wheels, she was not at all to blame for interpreting it personally, for assuming it to be a means to an end quite other than that which her husband had in mind.

She saw it, and there was no reason why she should n't, as a proof of his desire to meet her on her own ground, to get back to her. She took it as his recognition of that "one chance" for which she had pleaded, and, deeply touched, flung herself unreservedly into coöperating with him.

Day after day, she had driven with him in the car in search of just the right place, had made researches in the matter of climate and soil in each county, had hunted through lists sent her in hundreds by various estate agents, had telephoned all over the countryside making appointments with local agents to be shown over estates that seemed to offer prospects.

When at last they had settled on the five hundred acres that climbed steeply up from the bank of the

river at Cliveden, and Lady Wickens had time to stop and think once more, she found to her surprise that she had tided over the emptiness that the children's going would otherwise have left. While a great part of her was with them in their adventure in America, she found that she had given more of herself than she realized to the recreation between herself and her husband of a *modus vivendi*. That side of her which craved for news of Madge and Dick, which watched over them constantly in spirit, which sent her many times to London to snatch a glimpse of Tom, she suppressed ruthlessly when with her husband. She never spoke of them unless he mentioned them first, and then was careful to conceal the depth of her interest in them.

She did n't question her own ultimate sincerity when she put her husband and his affairs in the forefront of her attention, catered to his moods and tenses, coaxed him into letting her dine with him in town, into taking her to theaters afterwards, and in every way that was possible broke up the old routine of their lives.

Had she been afflicted with the curse of self-analysis, Lady Wickens might have realized that the lingering fragrance of the romantic echoes that she had stirred up within herself were based on a very simple human desire, — that fundamentally she was bestowing attention only because she needed attention herself. That aspect of her own motives escaped her, however, as completely as did the motives of her husband.

In effect it was a second wooing, a wooing reversed; and, under the concentrated light of her interest, Sir Thomas began to smolder like a piece

of damp wood beneath the rays of the sun focused through a magnifying glass. In his own metaphor, he found that he was not asked to hold her skein of wool while she darned, but that she was willing to hold his. On such terms he admitted her to partnership in the matter of the Home; and, finding her a willing lieutenant rather than a domineering general, began, creakily at first, like a rusty hinge at the unusual touch of oil, to enjoy opening up little by little. Not being contradicted, or criticized, or laughed at, or, worse than all, left out, had the same effect upon him as a trail of nuts upon a squirrel. He began to venture a step farther each day, always ready to leap back.

Dick and Madge had sailed at the beginning of May. By the end of September he had not yet ventured far enough to resign from the Stock Exchange, even though the search for the site of the Home had proved to him that some subtle change had taken place in the mental relationship between himself and his wife. The encrustation of thirty years loosens slowly, however, and in a twisted, pathetic way he was suspicious of the change. He could n't quite believe in the truth of it. It seemed that the whole thing might suddenly slip back again to what it had been. He was not quite sure that there was n't something backhanded in his receiving all this attention only after the children had gone. Then, too, while he was glad to be left in full possession of his wife and his house, he had resented the calm way in which they had packed up and sailed off. There was something wrong about it. He could n't bring himself to believe that they would not come slinking back with their tails between their legs; and,

as the months slipped by and nothing of the sort happened, he told himself that it was only their distorted pride which prevented them from doing so. He knew that they must be miserably unhappy over there in a strange country; and he was torn between the desire to say that it served them right and the desire to see himself playing the part of the magnanimous father forgiving them when they returned to ask his pardon. There were even moments when he wished that they had not gone, or that at least they would come back for a time to see what they had given up. After all, he said to himself, they would n't have gone if it had n't been for Tom, who had bedazed them into going with his anti-social arguments, his insidious, disloyal propaganda. Thank God *that* boy had hidden himself away somewhere! And once the Home was well launched, he would n't have to bother about him again. In the face of the gift to the nation, few people would wish to dig up that unfortunate conscientious objector episode.

He smiled to himself at the thought that the copy for the press was already prepared. The news would be broadcasted very soon now! And meanwhile . . . he glanced approvingly at his wife . . . things were shaping very pleasantly, very pleasantly indeed!

At that moment Lady Wickens picked up Madge's letter. " My dear," she said, " do you realize that nearly half a year has flown since the chil . . . since we started working on the Home? That we began in May and it 's now almost the end of September? "

Sir Thomas nodded. " I think we may congratulate ourselves on the number of things we have ac-

complished," he said. "When you consider that we have scoured nearly every county in the south of England . . ."

Lady Wickens interrupted. "Such days! I never knew before how beautiful it was! Thomas, we must n't ever mew ourselves up so closely again! It 's the greatest possible mistake. One needs the wind across a heath from time to time to blow the cobwebs away. Don't you feel that too?"

"I must confess," said Sir Thomas, "that bowling along the open roads gives one a sense of freedom that is most exhilarating!"

"Then, my dear," said Lady Wickens, "I 've got something even more exhilarating to suggest! . . . I want you to take me to New York!"

Sir Thomas' complacency tumbled about his ears. "New York?" he echoed. "What on earth . . .?" Dark clouds of suspicion began to gather. There was some scheme here.

Lady Wickens interrupted again. "Don't be alarmed!" she said, smiling. "It need n't take us more than a month. But I think we 've got to go for one definite and very exciting reason. Madge is engaged to be married! The letter came half an hour before you did this afternoon. Here it is!"

Sir Thomas made no move to take it. The mention of Madge was enough. Must she reach out even from across the Atlantic to interfere again? . . . He could almost hear that exasperating laugh of hers, a sort of echo of it that made a disturbing ripple. Was this the slipping back that he had half expected? Had their going away made no difference? Was Margaret's interest really in them all the time? Did they still come first?

Lady Wickens dropped her feet from the long chair and leaned forward and put her hand on his arm. "Listen to me!" she said. "You and I know perfectly well that if Madge has made up her mind to marry some one, she 'll marry him whether we approve or not."

Sir Thomas sniffed sarcastically.

Lady Wickens continued. "Now don't think I'm worrying about Madge. I'm not . . . not really, that is. But naturally I 'm curious. What mother would n't be? For that matter, I 'd be surprised if you were n't too. Now, confess, my dear! Are n't you, a little?"

Sir Thomas refused to admit it. He shrugged his shoulders. "If I remember rightly," he said, "even Dick remarked that it would be a job for the man she married."

Lady Wickens smiled. "Then don't you wonder just what sort of brave man it is to whom she is engaged?"

The vision of Madge in those abhorrent pyjamas and that infamous dressing gown sent Sir Thomas' eyebrows up. "It 's only some young fool who does n't realize what he 's in for!" he growled.

"Perhaps!" said Lady Wickens. "But, knowing Madge, does n't it occur to you that perhaps he, and undoubtedly his father and mother, are wondering what sort of family Madge left behind? My dear, I think our ears should be tingling at this very moment! One does n't give one's only daughter away by letter, — not without seeming decidedly odd, to say the least of it! . . . We owe it to ourselves, as well as to them, to go over and see and be seen. Merely from the social point of view we must do it.

Your own position, my dear! And then too . . . ." She paused, took a breath and went on again . . . " Don't forget, Thomas, that once they 're married and settled down, we sha'n't see very much more of Madge! "

Lady Wickens' eyes were on her husband's face. She felt vaguely that this was in some sort the first climax of their new life, the test of her six months' effort.

Sir Thomas had caught at her last words. It was true, he thought. Madge's life would be over there with this husband of hers. If she came back, it would be merely to visit, to exhibit herself in her new state, and not to make any claims, to thrust herself on him again. And on the other hand, if Margaret once saw Madge married, belonging to some one else, finally settled, it would mean that her whole interest would be centered on her home, on their plans, on himself.

Groping and blundering, Sir Thomas worked his devious way through his first alarm to a feeling of renewed security. It would seem that things could never slip back now!

" Yes," he said, " you won't see much of Madge in future! With children of her own she 'll forget us soon enough, and all that we 've done for her! However, we 'll go over for the ceremony, as you seem to have set your heart on it, even though it 'll be a tremendous business for me to arrange to go. You had better send her a cable, my dear! "

Lady Wickens, knowing nothing of the route by which he had arrived at agreement, rose and went over to him, her eyes shining with tenderness and triumph. " I knew you would understand, Thomas! " she said.

Chapter Eight

One of the phenomena of wartime was the feverish haste with which marriage was consummated. Apparently neither Madge nor Ted Baird had escaped that urgent spirit, for within fourteen days of their meeting again, — during which time it was established that his regiment was the Brooklyn one, that he lived not in New York but on Long Island, and that he had been writing frantically to every conceivable address in England and France to try and discover what had become of Madge, — they were married.

Lady Wickens' cable arrived a few days after they had gone up into the Berkshires on their honeymoon.

It came one evening when Dick, having cleared himself a space on the table among a pile of books, was in the middle of a long letter to Tom. His last sentences read:

"He seems to be an awfully decent chap, one of the ugly good-looking sort, with a steady eye. Not at all the kind who has mucked about with women. He'd probably be pretty useful in a rough and tumble on Boat Race night. What's equally important is that he and Madge seem to be really keen on each other, so I don't think the old girl's making any error, thank God! And for her sake I'm damned glad he turned up again.

"For my own I'm not so sure. I'm going to

miss her like the devil. It 's the first time in my life that I 've been utterly and completely on my own, and I 'm not sure that I 'm going to like it. Even after four days of it, the feeling of Madge not being around is rather weird. I . . ."

And at that moment the bell rang. It was the cable. Dick came back into the living room and read it.

" H'm! " he said thoughtfully and laid it on top of one of the books.

He sat down, filled and lit a pipe, and then took up his pen again. The last word was " I." He went right on — " have just received a cable from the Mater, saying that she and the Gov'nor want to come over for the wedding. It strikes me as rather significant that it should have come too late! We could have died without them all right in the war. Now they think we can't get married without them! Comic, isn't it? I'll write and tell 'em they've missed the bus. That'll keep them at home. I'm glad Madge didn't pander to that fossilized worn-out myth. She wouldn't go through the old slave-market ceremonial of bridesmaids and reception, either! She just drove with me to the church, met him there, and paraded in front of the padre without any frills.

" Incidentally, our in-laws, who of course were there, are very nice. Madge and I went down for a week-end — sort of mutual inspection — before they were married. The family consists of the father and mother, Ted, a sister, and a kid brother about twenty-one, Colin by name, now at college. He 's vastly amusing. Thinks Ted and I are fossils. And called me 'Sir'! Made me feel like old

Father William. He's a destructive young merchant. Lord knows whether he's typical of the post-war generation, but he thinks the show was comic, that Christianity's more or less a joke, and that life's a vastly overrated performance. The only enthusiasm he allows himself is tennis. The rest is blaa! The father and mother can be lumped together. They are both growing old gracefully and making rather a charming business of it. Incidentally they are enormously good pals with their children, which struck me rather. I did n't get much idea of the girl."

Dick leaned back and blew several thoughtful smoke rings. Once or twice he poised his pen, as if about to go on. Each time he stopped. Finally he grunted and wrote, "Her name's Virginia. She's about Madge's age. Well, old man, it's getting late and I must turn in. Cheerio," and he signed his name.

Then he got up and stretched; but instead of going to bed, he began walking up and down the room. The only change that he had made in the apartment was to move his belongings from the little bedroom in front to the big one behind that had been Madge's. But the whole apartment, indeed the entire scheme of things, seemed changed now that she had gone. It was no longer a place to come back to, even though with Madge there he had generally come back as silent as a bear and read and smoked in the big armchair by the fireplace. But now —

"What am I doing here?" he asked himself. "What do I want to do?" For a long time he stood still, staring down at the tobacco jar, trying to answer his questions. Finally he shrugged his

shoulders. "I'm damned if I know!" he said aloud. "Everything — and nothing!"

He gave a sarcastic laugh that ended in a sigh and went across to the window and leaned on the ledge, looking up into the deep luminous blue above the roofs. "Gorgeous sky!" he murmured and for a time lost his way in the maze of stars.

From the bottom of the island came the bellow of a liner, gentled by distance, cautiously sticking her nose out into the stream. It was answered by the excited sirens of ferries. Just around the corner the metallic far-off rumble of street cars swelled into din and died away again. Occasional footsteps rang under the window and groups of youths and girls broke from talk into an eddy of laughter that followed them on their way, leaving a sort of ripple in the quiet night. A cat, low-bellied, padded across the street, delicately hurdling the whitely gleaming street-car rails as though they had been bands of water.

Dick stirred. "Why the hell do I stay here?" he thought. "I don't seem to have made even a beginning. And now that Madge has gone . . . Was Tom right? He said that we had to go this alone . . . I don't know. I suppose I'd better stick it a bit longer and see."

If there was any meaning in his brother's counsel, Dick had a chance to find it out in the next three months. With an obstinate perversity he made more than a virtue of necessity. He made it a matter of pride to see what he could do now that he was flung entirely upon his own resources, and even made it a hard and fast rule never to go near Madge and Ted unless specifically invited.

After their honeymoon they had installed themselves in an apartment at the lower end of Fifth Avenue on the top floor of a new building, so high that the noise of traffic became a rather rhythmic and companionable murmur. Their windows looked over the East River and the shipping to Brooklyn, while immediately below was a wild phantasmagoria of roofs, among which the cross streets were mere bits of ribbon soiled by moving spots that were automobiles and trucks.

It was singularly attractive and Dick would have liked nothing better than to drop in and sit around with them. But his first dinner there showed him that the business of being Mrs. Edward Baird, Junior, absorbed Madge completely, that she was bringing to it the same quality of chin-in-the-air that had carried her through the hospital days of the war without a falter. So Dick made his rule and went back to his empty rooms to try himself out alone.

For a time Madge forgot him. She had her own ideas about marriage, — the first of which was that the *hausfrau* period was a thing of the past. Running a house efficiently was one thing; but to do nothing but that was, in her phraseology, to sit down on the job. It demanded only about one tenth of a woman's intelligence and energy. The other nine tenths were to be devoted to herself, the idea being that the more she made of herself, the more respect Ted would have for her, and the more likely would he be to regard her as a pal and an equal.

" In other words, old thing," she said to him one day when they were seated on the springy turf at the top of a high hill in the middle of New England, " in other words, marriage is the hardest thing we ever

tackled. I 'm not a sloppy sentimentalist, and when I say I love you, I mean much more than just this . . . now . . . on our honeymoon. This will come to an end, unfortunately, and you will go back to work. It 's then that we 've got to watch it! Your career and ambitions will take you by the throat and drive you. The edges of what we 've got now will wear down. And the thing we 've got to fight against is letting ourselves take things for granted, letting ourselves sink back into a humdrum married couple like a million others!"

"Not us, Madge darling!" said Ted. "Anybody else you like, but never us!"

Madge nodded. "It must n't be!" she said. "That 's why I say we 've both got to use our heads. D' you see?"

"I do see!" said Ted.

"Then promise me, Ted—as I promise you—never to slack with each other, never to let yourself even to think about us carelessly. It 's easy now, but we 've got to remember to do it when some damn silly problem comes creeping up on us, apparently quite harmless and of no importance, but just worrying enough to make us shoot bitter things at each other if we 're not thinking. That can kill it quicker than anything else in the world. Believe me, the Gov'nor and the Mater are perfect examples of that kind of tragedy, the gradual slipping of respect and interest, the gradual growth of shoulder-shrugging, of acceptance . . . You don't know how ghastly it is!"

It was this spirit that they brought with them to the apartment on Fifth Avenue and made their absorption in each other complete.

Dick, meanwhile, saw the days go by on a dead level of monotony, nonentity almost. It is a hard thing to trace the intricate processes of the mind, to discover when it has taken to itself the whole, or part, or none, of this thing and that met with along the road of experience. He worked, went to an occasional theater, read a great deal. He lunched more frequently with Malone, argued with him fiercely about the League of Nations, refusing to accept the Irishman's dismissal of it as the "imperialistic illegitimate child, whose dam was war and whose sire was expediency." Once or twice he took Dorothy to dinner, to her infinite delight. But it was only with immense effort that he succeeded in making conversation. Fundamentally he shared no point of contact with her, and realized that it was the personality of his sister which had made their threesome possible.

Apparently he remained static. He was unaware that subconsciously he was getting something from the daily sight of the skyline of Fifth Avenue, from the mere routine of his existence, from the fact that every day removed him a little further from the desire to remain segregated. He did not know that the very exasperation, the sickened resentment, with which he followed the shilly-shallyings at Geneva, the atrociousness of the Black and Tans in Ireland, and the desperate chaos in Germany, were making for a perspective that was the first sign of health in him.

He bought every war book that he could lay hands on, rejecting with oaths and a sense of personal betrayal those that were nothing but sentimental twaddle and lies; devouring those which were real in much

the same spirit as that with which the Spartan boy held the fox to his vitals.

Among them was a slim volume of verse, written with a pen that might have been dipped in blood. For a month Dick was unable to get away from these poems. They haunted him, obsessed him, filled him with a mighty exultation that some one had been able to get the truth of it all, the sham of it all, on paper. He bought several copies and sent one eagerly to Tom, and one to his father with a certain sardonic humor, and one to Ted with the idea of testing him out; and one he gave to Malone at the office the next day with the remark, "Here's the best advertising copy ever written!"

As he went to his desk he saw a typewritten letter on the blotter. He opened it. It was from the president of the company, informing him that the board had accepted his designs for the new model and requesting him to present himself at the president's room that morning.

As Dick read it two lines from a poem called "Survivors," in that volume which he had just dropped on Malone's desk, came back to his mind.

> They'll soon forget their haunted nights;
> Their cowed subjection to the ghosts of friends who died.

With a sudden passion Dick crunched the letter into a ball with his two hands — the letter which meant promotion, success — and jerked it at the waste basket.

"God!" he said. "One does n't forget!"

Chapter Nine

JUST before five o'clock one snowy afternoon in December, Malone came over to Dick's desk and perched himself on the edge.

"Smoke?" he queried, and held out a packet of cigarettes.

"Thanks," said Dick.

They lit up. For a moment Jimmy swung one leg. "Doing anything to-night?"

"Family stuff," said Dick.

"Uhuh!" said Jimmy. "I was just wondering if you'd care to earn a bar to that war cross of yours?"

"Is that intended for humor?" asked Dick stiffly.

Jimmy shook his head. "No, it's the straight dope. If you're willing to take a little punishment, you can knock all the Boy Scout good acts for a row of garbage containers!"

"I have n't the least idea what you're driving at," said Dick, "and I'm afraid I'm not interested."

Malone leaned over and dropped his voice. "Let me tell you," he said quietly. "There's a guy downstairs waiting for me. I want you to meet him. His name's Charlie King. He nearly got his in the Belleau Woods after he'd cleaned up a few machine-gun nests and bumped off more Fritzies than he'd ever seen in his life before. He got a medal for it and a week's leave in Paris. Some birds had all the luck, eh? But this particular hero does n't collect medals.

They don't interest him a damn bit. He came back, having made up his mind that war 's the bunk and now he 's just about cuckoo with it!"

Dick scowled. "Well?" he said.

Malone slowly blew out a lungful of tobacco, his eyes intently reading Dick's face. "Charlie 's a good friend of mine," he said. "We 've played around quite a little . . . I 've got a hunch that a few wise cracks from you would help him snap out of it."

"From *me?*" Dick looked up quickly. "Of course I . . . but good Lord, man!"

"I know all that!" said Jimmy, breaking in. "You 'd tell me that you had n't a helpful word in your whole vocabulary, and would n't know how to use it if you had! Lay off the modesty stuff! You can just sit and listen, see! The point is that you were there. Merely to be able to spill it to a man like you, who knows the whole works, may save him from Bellevue. What do you say?"

"Good God!" said Dick. He moved uneasily in his chair. "Oh, hell!" he said finally. "I suppose we 'd better take the poor devil to dinner somewhere."

Malone dropped his cigarette and trod on it. "I 'm going to introduce the two of you," he said, "and beat it. No sense in my butting in. I 've told him about you, and he 's crazy to meet you."

"Oh!" said Dick. "I see . . . Right! I 'll just 'phone my sister. I was to have gone out with them to-night."

Malone nodded. "Thanks, old scout!" he said. "I thought you 'd be there with the goods! . . . You 'll find us in the lobby when you come down."

Dick reached for the telephone. There was about

him the same hard efficiency, grimness almost, with which in France he received the information of a gunner smashed up, a lieutenant wounded in the front-line observation post, and proceeded to walk through a barrage to get them in. When he went out of the office he had all the appearance of a man leaving a dugout, rather than one who was about to emerge into Broadway at Columbus Circle.

Malone caught him by the elbow as he came out of the elevator behind a group of stenographers who might have been the chorus of any Broadway show.

"Here we are, Dick," he said. "Charlie, this is Captain Wickens!"

Somewhere in the back of his mind Dick registered the fact that it was the first time Jimmy Malone had called him Dick. Then in some curious way Jimmy disappeared, was obliterated. Charlie King was shaking his hand and looking at him with eyes that seemed to want to dig down to his soul, to measure it and judge it, — from a standard that Dick knew too well.

"How d' you do?" he murmured automatically.

Around them other stenographers and men surged out from different elevators. Their gates clanged and the starter, with a little gesture of his hand, made a series of sharp, hard metallic clicks as though he were popping huge insects between the nails of finger and thumb.

It was Jimmy who called them back from their mutual examination. "Listen, you fellows," he said, with a wink at Dick, "I've got an important date that came up at the last minute, and I'll have to hurry to make it. Sorry I can't come, but I guess you can get along without me . . . G' by!"

"All right, Jimmy!" said Dick. He turned to King. "It's a trifle early for dinner. What do you suggest?"

King shrugged his shoulders. "Oh . . . dinner! Let's go some place where it's quiet, where we can talk."

"The only place I know round here," said Dick, "is Child's. It's likely to be empty there at this time of day."

King nodded and led the way out of the building. As he crossed the Circle, he didn't seem to be aware of traffic. He walked ahead as if it didn't exist. In the middle of it he jerked his head towards Dick and said, "You were in the front line."

Dick wasn't sure if it was a question or a statement. But he answered, "All through the show."

King relapsed into silence again, and, almost as if Dick were not there, pushed his way through the swing doors and walked down to the far end of the restaurant where there was a large group of empty tables. He hung up his coat and hat and then sat down.

"What'll you have?" queried Dick, as he joined him.

"I don't want anything," said King.

"Well," said Dick, "I'll order a couple of coffees to justify our existence."

The waiter came up with two glasses of water which he splashed down on the table with a technique of masterly carelessness, and went off to get the coffee.

King had taken a pencil out of his pocket and was intently drawing patterns on a paper napkin.

Dick took his first real look at him. He had all

the appearance of a college athlete, trained down, lean, not a day over thirty-one. It required no imagination to picture him cleaning up machine-gun nests. He was the sort of chap, thought Dick — paying him the highest compliment he knew — that one would have picked as the ideal subaltern, knowledgeable, very much alive, obviously stout-hearted, the kind one could rely on to get a job done, the staff and the enemy notwithstanding.

King suddenly dropped his pencil and looked up.

With something of a shock, Dick had an immediate impression that an old man looked out through those eyes.

"Do you know," said King, "that you are the first person I 've met since I got home that I feel I can talk to? You, an Englishman, and in my own country!" He paused and then added, "I 'm married, too! . . . Are you?"

Dick shook his head. "No."

"God! You 're lucky!"

The words were spoken in an undertone as if he were not so much addressing them to Dick as thinking them aloud. But there was a dreadful flatness about them, a finality, that made them burn like a splash of mustard gas.

They affected Dick physically. He felt the muscles of his stomach tighten, and his throat go dry. Some queer kinship with this man which, in a way, had nothing to do with the man himself but went back to war, as such, made him want to listen. More than that, however, he had an odd premonition that he was going to find out something about himself, that something was about to happen to himself. He could feel his heart begin to pound as in the old days,

when the first five-nine shell crashed into his battery position.

The waiter put two cups of coffee down between them, dropped a couple of checks, and went away again. Neither man noticed him. The steaming cups remained untouched.

Charlie King went on. "Don't think I 'm crazy," he said. "I 'm not,—at least, not yet!"

"My dear chap!" said Dick.

King laughed. "With the sort of thing I 'm up against, I would n't care to make any rash bets, though! . . . As a matter of fact, I 'd like you to tell me whether you think I *am*. That 's why I agreed to come along when Jimmy Malone suggested it. He told me you 'd been all through it, and I knew that one look at you would be all that was necessary. If you don't mind my saying so, it was. To paraphrase Omar, you did n't come out by the same door at which you entered in!"

Dick nodded.

"Do you mind if I . . . bore you?"

"Go ahead!" said Dick, almost impatiently.

"Thanks!" said King. He picked up the pencil again and, while he spoke, he covered another napkin with cabalistic patterns, glancing up from time to time at Dick as though to underline certain points, then returning to his pencil again.

Other people began to come in, and sat down at adjacent tables. The smells of fish, roast meat, boiled cabbage, were silent but strong testimony of their widely differing palates; but the two men might have been—were indeed—alone, cut off, not merely by a few feet of space but by the quality of their concentration.

King began with a jerk. "We don't need to say anything about the war. We both know it, and it's a picnic compared to . . . this."

"God, yes!" said Dick.

"My wife and I had been married five years when this country entered the war. She was Junior League and all that sort of thing, and we were crazy about each other: had been all the time. We still were when I chucked my job and got a commission and went overseas." King hesitated for a moment and then plunged on again.

"I needn't tell you," he said, "what saying good-by to her meant, even though we were both bursting with patriotism, convinced that America was going to show the world and all that stuff!" He laughed harshly. "It's enough to say that until I went on board the trooper I hadn't been away from my wife once all the time we were married . . ."

"I know!" said Dick.

King took a deep breath, then went on again, quietly and evenly.

Dick felt as though he were watching a surgeon laying back fold after fold of living flesh.

"If I had known how I was coming back to her," said King, "I should have let one of the Heinies finish me off in Belleau Woods. We've learned to loathe each other. It's not her fault. It's not mine either. It's simply the war. We look at each other from opposite sides of No Man's Land. She can't come over and I can't go back. We've . . . lost each other. Do you get the peculiar refinement of it? Do you see how love began to turn to pity, pity to contempt, and contempt to hatred? . . . I sometimes wondered, when I saw a dead man hung up on

the wire, just what feelings he went through before he died. I believe I know now. I know what comes after hatred too!"

The pencil was still. King had it in his fingers and was breaking it in half and half again.

Dick could n't look at him any more. He cleared his throat, savagely. "Well?" he demanded.

King passed a hand over his face and hair. "What does one do when one ought to be dead and is n't? I only had two years of it over there — less than that. You had four. Have *you* discovered some way to go on living, some way to give back a meaning to things? *Is* there any way? I had thought that my wife would bring me back to life. I had thought that when we saw each other again, some miracle would happen inside me. It was like putting my arms round a stranger, a mask, a living ghost not even speaking the same language. I can't tell her anything. We don't understand each other. She 's jazz mad, and all she can make of me is that I 've ' lost my pep.' She can't see, naturally, that she 's dancing on a million corpses. It is n't her fault. She just can't get it, that 's all. It 's too big. She tried to understand it at first. Then she sneered at me. She 's frightened of me now . . . frightened of *me!*"

Once more King stopped. He was squeezing the napkin into little round tight balls.

Dick's head was propped on his hands. He was staring down at the table, seeing Jimmy Hillyard die again, seeing green slimy faces trodden into the mud, hearing screams . . . and in his mind he kept saying, "Oh, Christ! . . . Oh, Christ!" . . . And something in him was twisting and dodging, trying to get away from it, trying to be free, struggling.

King's voice came again, like a relentless hand that was pushing him down.

"It 's a queer price for patriotism, is n't it?" said King. "My father and mother say I 'm taking it too hard. They try to be very kind and gentle with me. They make allowances! God in Heaven, allowances! When those of us who have been through it are trying our damnedest to make allowances for them!" He laughed. "Talk about the Mad Hatter's tea party! I feel like a sane man put into a straight-jacket by a bunch of lunatics for the crime of being sane. Have *you* ever taken out your service revolver and asked yourself if that is n't the solution? I won't admit that there 's nothing but that. There 's got to be something else if one can only find it, and, by God, I 'm going to try, — not simply for myself, but for some of those men of mine whom I occasionally run into, buck privates who did magnificently, poor devils! They 've neither education nor background, and what 's worse they have n't got work. I see them wandering round this city like lost souls, outcasts. They don't understand themselves, and in all God's green world there 's not one single soul to stretch out a hand and help them. They are like a species which has outlived its epoch. There must be thousands of them all over this country, perfectly husky physically, but spiritual casualties, out of touch, cut off, gone! Sweet thought, eh? They 've not merely been mustered out of the army, but out of society. And this country 's so busy dreaming its sky-scraping dream that it does n't know what 's happened! It does n't even realize that it belongs. As far as the world is concerned we 're nothing but a village spinster in mittens who thinks the big city is such a wicked place

that she would n't think of going to it except as one of a hypocritical delegation to stop drink and cigarette smoking! The war was the delegation, and now we 're back in our village, preening ourselves because we think we 've done it! And there are those men like a flock of lost souls! . . . Oh, hell, I 've mulled it over from a million viewpoints and at the end I don't seem to get one damn bit nearer to anything! But, for God's sake, who 's crazy, — are we, who think these things? Or are they, who don't?"

With a wide gesture, King swept all the balls of paper on to the floor. He pulled out a packet of cigarettes, lit one and began smoking as though he would devour it. A moment later he caught up a cup of coffee, which was stone cold, and gulped it down.

Dick made no move. He sat rapt, motionless, absorbed. That premonition which he had had at the outset seemed to have happened. Unconsciously he had been weighing, admitting, rejecting, not the actual things that King had said, but their action on what was in his own mind, as though they were a mustard plaster drawing inflammation to the top. He had been conducting, as it were, a clearing house, in relation, not to this man, but to the need of his own fundamental self. It was as involuntary a process as the absorption of moisture by a plant, the reaching after that which will give life, a form of ego that was simply biological.

The fact that this man King was going through a personal hell deeper than anything Dick had known seemed utterly secondary, utterly impersonal. Dick reacted with that measure of sympathy which is as automatic, and superficial, as the production of sound

by the touching of a piano key. But only the outer edges of him, the civilized part of him, were sorry for King. The inmost Dick, the thing in him that, metaphorically speaking, desired moisture, was rejoicing at having found it. The struggle of the man across the table rounded off his own, set a final period to it and swept him to a second's vision, an inkling of some sort of answer.

For the space of half a breath he seemed to be held above it all, to look down on it from an immense perspective. He saw himself and his petty agonizings — to say nothing of King's — as things for laughter, as infinitesimal and ridiculous as war itself. All these months he had been thinking of it as *the* war, *his* war; thinking of it, agonizing over it, in terms of his own belief and responsibility. There was the absurdity. He was nothing but a blind ant, bitter because he could n't carry an elephant; a baby, howling because he could n't put out the sun; a self-appointed policeman, going crazy because he could n't arrest evolution single-handed!

The problem was still there, unaltered, but it was no longer his problem, focused on himself. The values seemed to have shifted. They were no longer emotional. It was as though he had been suddenly absolved from "the cowed subjection to the ghosts of friends who died", and, like a diver pried free of the clutch of some giant shell, was pushed to the surface by the pressure in the depths.

"My God, man!" he said. "How can I show you? I don't know how to put it into words, even to myself. I had n't even got it to put into words five minutes ago! Somehow you 've given me the thing that I 've been waiting for, the thing I 've been try-

ing to fog out. It 's this. It is n't any question of who 's right or wrong. We 're right, but so are they too. We know things, think things, that they can't be expected to know or think, because they have n't had the same experience, and because the imagination is n't big enough to get it. You and I are just as abnormal as if we 'd got three legs, — the third leg being what we got in No Man's Land. We can't amputate it. We 're never going to be the same as the crowd again. And as they won't tolerate the sight of it, we 've just got to make up our minds to hide it, to keep it for our own secret use, cultivate a three-legged technique . . . See what I 'm driving at? "

" Up to a point," said King, " but what . . . "

" Let me try another tack! " said Dick. " When Jules Verne first wrote about submarines and electric rifles and all those things, the people of his day thought he was as crazy as they think us now. We 've been jerked as far ahead as he was. We 've been wasting our energy cursing because people won't wake up and see. Verne did n't. He went on writing, — and we used his submarines! Don't you see? One of these days everybody will know the meaning of No Man's Land. It 's time, evolution, the pace of the slowest! "

King shrugged his shoulders. " Oh, evolution! " he said. " That does n't help the doughboys, does it? That does n't give me back my wife, either! "

For a moment Dick eyed him. Then he said quietly, " It does n't give me back my best pal, or my father and mother. It does n't give me back a religion, or a home, or any of the other nice simple prewar things. But," he leaned forward, " let me ask

you a question. If you had your choice between knowing what you know now and what you did before the show, which would it be?"

King considered for a moment. Then he replied, "Unfortunately, there's only one answer. Now!"

"Of course!" said Dick. "And therefore you don't want your wife back!"

King stared across the table. "God!" he said. "You mean . . . she's outgrown? . . . That's pretty ruthless!"

Dick nodded. "I know," he said, "and it's a part of the three-legged technique. In a last analysis it's self-defense. We're in the minority! It's that or perish! We've got to realize that we've outgrown nearly every damn thing according to its pre-war definition, — honesty, decency, politics, patriotism, any of them! The labels were all wrong. We've got our own meaning for them now!"

King was still staring. He nodded slowly. "I believe I begin to see what you mean," he said. "I must think it out . . . Let's go, do you mind? I feel as if I need space and movement . . ."

The snow was still falling when they got outside and for some moments the two men stood in the doorway, watching the maelstrom of cars go swishing round the statue in the center of the Circle.

King held out his hand. "I'd like to see you again sometime," he said.

"Any time," said Dick. "I'm staying here, permanently." They shook hands.

"It's been mighty nice of you," said King. "Good night, — and good luck!"

"Thanks," said Dick. "Same to you. Cheerio!"

He watched until King disappeared into the crowd,

became an indistinguishable unit of it. Then he turned up the collar of his overcoat and began to walk down Broadway with an odd feeling of excitement, as though he were seeing it for the first time.

Chapter Ten

It was nearly ten o'clock when Dick, having dined alone uptown — he couldn't have told where — found himself about to walk past his sister's apartment on his way home.

He glanced up at it. "I wonder whether they're back yet?" he thought. On a sudden impulse, breaking all rules, he turned in and presented himself at the operator's desk.

"Mr. and Mrs. Baird?" he asked.

"What name, please?"

"Captain Wickens."

Without further word, the operator manipulated plugs and buttons, and presently spoke in a whiny singsong into the mouthpiece that curved upwards from her chest. "Captain Wickens calling . . . Yes, m'am!" And then turning to Dick, "Will you go right up?"

"Thank you," said Dick. "Good!" he thought. "They're in."

He had to wait a few moments for the elevator, but at last he was whisked up to the seventeenth floor. As he stepped out and the gate of the elevator shut softly behind him, the door of the apartment opened.

Virginia Baird stood there.

She gave him a smile and a hand. "How do you do?" she said. "Ted and Madge haven't got back yet. Will you come and talk to me till they do?"

Dick's surprise was obvious. His hesitation lasted only a fraction of a second. "Thank you," he said. "I'd like to very much . . . How do you happen to be here?"

While he took off his coat, she told him that she had come in that afternoon and, when they saw the snow begin, Madge had suggested that she stay the night as they were both going on a shopping expedition the next day. By the time she had finished her explanation, they had made their way into the living room.

There was a fire burning. The curtains were drawn across the windows, and two table lamps, one at the sofa and the other at the piano, shed a soft light through parchment shades. Virginia sat down on the sofa.

For a moment Dick glanced round, taking in the dark oak furniture that gleamed where the light struck it, the silver bowl of red roses that stood on the table behind Virginia's head, the rows of different-colored books that filled the shelves on the end wall. In some intangible way, he thought, it was alive, warm, lived in.

Virginia was watching him.

He pulled the armchair round so that it faced her and the fire at the same time. "May I offer you a cigarette?" he asked.

"You may!"

Dick struck a match for her, lit his own, and sat down. He didn't quite know how to begin, or what to begin on. It was odd, he thought, being supposed to know each other when they hadn't ever met except in a crowd.

He became aware that she was studying him, and

cleared his throat. "Er . . . there's something awfully attractive about this room, don't you think?" he said.

Virginia smiled for a moment. Then she said quietly, "You're very English, aren't you?"

Dick looked at her quickly. "Oh, really? . . . It depends what you mean."

"I mean," said Virginia, "that you always expect the other fellow to do all the work."

Dick moved a little, uneasily. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'm afraid I . . ."

Virginia laughed. "I'll explain!" she said. "Why do you have to go on treating me like a total stranger?"

Dick protested. "Oh, but really . . ."

"I don't think you've got a leg to stand on!" said Virginia. "Are you aware that you've seen me precisely four times, — once before the wedding, once at the wedding, once at the house-warming in October, and here we are just before Christmas and this is the fourth time! . . . Long Island isn't quite off the map, you know, and you *are* Madge's brother!"

"Good lord!" said Dick. "I'm most awfully sorry! I did n't realize how beastly rude I must have seemed."

Virginia puffed at her cigarette, watching the discomfort on his face. "There has been quite a little conversation about it!" she said dryly, and paused to let that sink in also. Then she added, "There's another thing!"

"Oh, please!" said Dick.

"It rather gives you away, too," said Virginia. "It is that you don't call me anything. I'm neither

Miss Baird nor Virginia. You simply talk *at* me! . . . Don't you think it would be far more sensible if we ceased to be neuter, if we signed an armistice and fraternized a little?"

"I'm all for it!" said Dick.

"Then," said Virginia, "personally I'd much rather be Virginia than Miss Baird. In any case, I warn you that I'm going to call you Dick!"

Somewhat to her surprise she found Dick's eyes intently on her. She had a feeling that it was the first time he had really seen her. And then, suddenly, even more to her surprise, he got up and came to the sofa.

"Will you shake hands on that?" he said eagerly.

"Why . . . of course!"

Dick held her hand tightly, looking down at her. "Thank you, Virginia!" he said.

The change in his voice left her silent, wondering a little, not quite sure of what she had done, very much aware of a stupid tightening of her throat while Dick looked at her with such strange intentness.

On the previous occasions of their meeting she had been a trifle piqued at his utter obliviousness of her existence. She had started out to-night, gaily determined to investigate, to scratch him and see what lay underneath. She felt now that he had completely taken things out of her hands, run away with her, like a cantankerous saddle horse in the Park suddenly taking the bit between its teeth for no reason and altering the whole complexion of the ride. She was not too sure of how to go on.

"Do you know," said Dick, "it's the most amazing thing!"

"What is?"

"Finding you here to-night!"

"Why?"

"Because for the first time since the war I've felt like a . . . like a human being!"

Her eyes met his. "Oh!" she said. "Why this evening?"

"I don't know!" said Dick. "There's no rhyme or reason for it. I ought to be feeling absolutely laid out!"

"What *do* you mean?"

Dick sat down by her on the sofa. "I met a man to-night," he said, "an American too — an officer — who's most frightfully down on his luck, and for over an hour I listened while he told me all about it."

Virginia nodded.

Dick checked. "You're sure I'm not boring you?"

"Go on!" said Virginia.

Dick went on. "I can't tell you the sort of hell he's going through, or the way he told me. It made me feel like throwing bombs at first, poor devil! And then in some amazing way, as if it were the last straw on the camel's back, it did things to me, kicked me round a corner, so to speak, and ever since I've been feeling like a captive balloon cut loose. I couldn't go back to my kennel and pull the door after me. It seemed to me that New York looked entirely different. It *felt* different. I felt that if I didn't see some one, talk to some one, I should bust . . . That's why I came round to find Madge and Ted."

He stopped.

Virginia waited for him to go on. As he didn't

she said, with an attempt at lightness, "Instead of which you found me and got bullied!"

"Instead of which," echoed Dick, "I found you . . . and instead of telling the girl downstairs to tell me to go to the devil, you asked me up, and have treated me like a white man and a pal. I . . . I needed both!"

Virginia had nothing to say.

Dick veered again. "Tell me," he said, "what are you doing?"

"Doing?" She was glad to be puzzled.

"Yes," said Dick. "I mean are you working, or just having a good time, or what?"

"Oh, I see! . . . I'm working. Have been ever since I graduated from college."

"Great stuff!" said Dick. "What at?"

"Composition."

"Composition?"

"Music!" said Virginia. "Orchestration, harmony. You know! I've never had anything published yet, but I live in hopes."

"Really!" said Dick. "How perfectly splendid! Will you let me listen to you sometime? I can't play a note but I love it. I sometimes sneak into Carnegie Hall on Saturday afternoons and just let it soak in!"

Virginia's eyes were wide. "*Do* you?"

"What else do you do?" asked Dick.

"Do I have to do anything else?" she smiled. "Well, my only other accomplishment is keeping Mother and Dad in order!"

"Fair enough!" said Dick. "Do you play golf?"

Virginia made a face. "I play at it! Have done with Dad for about a year, but I can't seem to get the hang of it. Ted tells me that you're awfully good."

Dick shook his head. "It's simply a question of relativity! My game happens to be a little better than Ted's, that's all. . . . But if you'd let me come down in the spring, I might be able to look you over and make a suggestion or two?"

"Why didn't you come down last fall?" The question was put quite simply, without any indication of a desire to administer another dig.

Dick didn't answer for a moment. He frowned and shrugged his shoulders. "Thank God I didn't!" he said. "You'd have hated me if I had! I was n't fit to speak to."

Virginia looked at him, hesitated, and then plunged in. "You mean . . . on account of that loathsome war?"

Dick's eyes went to hers. "So you think of it like that, do you?"

"Don't you?" asked Virginia. "Is there any other way to think of it? Was n't the whole world a madhouse? . . . I don't want to hurt your feelings, but we might just as well be honest with each other. I want you to know where I stand. I think the whole business was disgusting and horrible and unforgivable! Ted merely laughs at me when I say that! But I warn you that my opinion is not to be changed!"

Dick's face was a mixture of amazement and delight. "Lord!" he said, "I'm glad I came in here to-night! You don't know what it means to hear you say that! . . . But don't let's talk about it now, Virginia! I want to hear more about you. It seems incredible that you should have been here all the time and I never knew it! . . . How long are you staying in town?"

"I 'm going back to-morrow night," said Virginia.

"Must you?" asked Dick.

"Why, of course!" said Virginia.

Dick frowned. "Could n't you possibly stay a week?"

There was a tiny pause. Virginia found her finger tips tremendously interesting.

"Why, how absurd!" she said, and laughed. "I have n't any clothes or anything! . . . Besides, why should I stay?"

"It would be perfectly great if you would!" said Dick. "I can give you a thousand reasons for staying and absolutely none for running away again."

Virginia curled down in her corner of the sofa. "Give me another cigarette," she said, "and I 'll sit in judgment on your thousand reasons!"

Dick gave her a cigarette and fetched a match and moved the ash tray a couple of inches nearer to her hand. He remained standing with his back to the fire, looking at her.

It was n't that she made a trim, appealing little figure sitting there, her knees crossed, showing slim silken ankles. It was n't that her hands seemed to him unusually white, and that her hair was a warm chestnut, which, incidentally, made him realize, in combination with her name, that her family must have come from Scotland originally. It was n't that her eyes were friendly and that when she smiled now it was evident that they were far from total strangers.

It was the fact that Dick had only a few hours previously been "kicked round a corner", as he put it. It was the fact that she had come out to meet him at the moment when he was ready. It was the

fact that she was the first woman to have stretched out a hand to him since he had begun to try and find his way out of the slough of despond. It was the fact that he, who had tried to turn to his father and mother, then to Tom, and lastly to Madge, needed human contact. It was the fact that the accumulated spiritual repression of all these months had to find expression. It was the fact that the youth of him was clamoring to break through the mask of age that war had painted on his face.

All these things coming together had suddenly opened his eyes and shown him Virginia Baird.

"Well?" she said. "You seem to be having difficulty in finding those reasons."

Dick started. "I beg your pardon. I was thinking. There's only one reason—that really matters!"

"And that is . . . ?"

"That I want you to stay!" said Dick. "There are a million things that I want to tell you and ask you. I want . . . "

The faint scratchings of the key in the lock of the apartment door were like the knife of the guillotine. The atmosphere that they had created, that reaching out to one another, that momentary union of mood and feeling, were cut off short. Both of them felt it.

Dick left his sentence in mid-air, and, with an uncomfortable, self-conscious gesture, began fingering his tie.

Virginia jumped up from the sofa. In an utterly different voice, a "company voice," she said, "Here they are!" and hurried across the room towards the door.

It was Madge who came tearing in. "Hullo!"

she began, and then, catching sight of Dick, half-turned to Ted who was on her heels and said with a laugh, "Well, we need n't have broken our necks after all! . . . Virginia, old thing, I 've had you on my conscience all the evening!"

"Why, hullo, Dick! Delighted to see you!" said Ted.

Dick pulled himself together. "Hullo!" he said. "I hope you did n't mind my scratching the party to-night?"

Ted chuckled. "Between you and me," he said quietly, "you did n't miss anything! . . . Let 's shove on another log and gather round. What do you say to a highball? . . . Madge, a wee one? . . . Virginia?"

The two girls were chattering together. Madge had dropped her cloak on to a chair. Arm in arm they came over to the fire.

"Good idea," said Madge, "only make mine with ginger ale."

"Mine too!" said Virginia.

Madge stopped in front of her brother and smiled up at him.

"Well, old bean?" she said. "How 's things? . . . You look as if you 'd had good news!"

Dick glanced quickly at Virginia. Then he said to Madge, "Oh, I don't know . . . That 's a perfectly corking dress, old girl! The color suits you awfully well!"

Madge's eyebrows went up a fraction of an inch. But she made Dick a little bob. "Thank you kindly, sir!" she said, and, as she and Virginia sat down on the sofa, took another swift look at her brother. Ted came with the drinks.

For over an hour they all sat round the fire, the conversation going in eddies that caught up first one and then another. It was not until the clock on the mantelpiece began chiming midnight that the party broke up.

Dick knocked out his pipe and loosened himself from the depths of the armchair. "I hate to go," he said, "but . . ."

"What 's your hurry?" interrupted Ted. "I don't intend to budge for hours yet!"

"Good for you!" said Dick. "But, as a conscientious member of the proletariat I owe it to my employer to get a little sleep."

"That 's a new one!" chuckled Ted.

"Don't move, any of you!" said Dick. "You all look supremely comfortable. I 'll let myself out."

But Ted was already half up. "*Noblesse oblige!*" he said. "I 'll give you a hand with your coat."

Dick went to the sofa. "Cheerio, old thing!" he said to Madge. Then he held out his hand to Virginia. "May I give you a ring in the morning to find out what your plans are?" It sounded very casual.

Virginia gave him her hand. "Will you?" she said. "That 'll be awfully nice."

"Thanks," said Dick. "Good night!"

"Good night!" said Virginia.

There was silence in the living room while the two men, out in the hall, exchanged remarks until the elevator came up. Then the front door closed and Ted came strolling back into the room, stifling a yawn. He bent down over the sofa and kissed the top of Madge's head.

"Do we hit the hay?" he asked.

Madge nodded slowly. "Yes, let's!" Then she turned to Virginia. "I've got an idea, Virginia! Christmas is getting awfully close, and we can't possibly get everything to-morrow. Why don't you 'phone your mother to send you up some clothes, and stay here for the rest of the week? . . . Don't you think that's a good scheme, Ted?"

Ted nodded. "That's using the well-known bean!" he said.

Virginia was sitting very still, nursing a tingling hand. She didn't look up, but said slowly, "If you're perfectly certain it won't be an awful bother for you . . ."

Madge laughed. "It'll be frightful!" she said. "I don't know how I shall stand you!"

Virginia's face came up and there was a light in both eyes. "Then I should love to stay!" she said.

Whereupon Madge smiled to herself.

Chapter Eleven

THERE could be no question as to whether Dick's monopoly of Virginia came under the heading of cultivating a three-legged technique. It undoubtedly did, in that etiquette, family conversation and such important matters went by the board.

During her week in town he insisted that they have lunch together, teas and dinners together, almost every single day. When she returned to Long Island he quoted her own words to her — that it was not quite off the map — and proceeded to show up there two and three times a week during the rest of the winter. On what might be called the absent days he sent her books.

Old Mr. and Mrs. Baird made him very welcome at their dinner table and afterwards discreetly withdrew to the library, leaving the living room to the "young people", as they called Virginia and Dick. Colin was still at college, but naturally he was not slow in drawing deductions from his mother's letters, carefully phrased as they were. He summed the whole thing up in a nutshell to one of his "frat brothers" in the Addisonian college English of the day: "What d' you know! The English goof 's nuts on Jinny!"

Nor did the ripples leave Madge and Ted untouched. It was Ted who broached the subject one night as they sat down to dinner.

"Dad called me to-day," he said, "to ask my

opinion of some stock he's thinking of buying, but he seemed to be much more excited about Dick and Virginia. Did you know that Dick's more or less commuting down there? Looks to me as if the society columns had better get ready for another international event!"

Madge smiled. "Would you like to know when it all started?"

Ted helped himself to celery. "How long have you been hiding this from me, woman?"

"Only about three months!" said Madge. "Do you remember that night just before Christmas when you and I came back from a party and Dick and Virginia were here?"

"Yes, now that you remind me," said Ted. "But I don't remember noticing anything special."

"Maybe not," said Madge, "but it was perfectly obvious all the same! What do you suppose made me ask Virginia to stay a week?"

"My dear," said Ted, "I'll hand it to you! All I can say is that it takes an Englishman to know an Englishman. I would have said that Dick was just as wooden-faced as ever, that night."

"He was," said Madge. "A little more so if anything!"

These various exchanges at their expense, if suspected by Virginia, who, by virtue of being a woman, perhaps, had her ear more closely to the ground, were completely unknown to Dick, who pursued the even tenor of his way with a sincerity of purpose, a doggedness, that was a reflection of his father's whole life.

Even at the end of her week in New York, Virginia knew very well that the fraternization that she

had suggested was already vastly outdistanced. She was profoundly aware that the silent, preoccupied Dick who had not paid her the slightest attention hitherto, who had remained as inscrutable as a red Indian, was now showing her sides of himself that were different from anything she had ever imagined about him. She remarked, too, that they were shown to no one but herself; and so, when she went back home, she was filled with the conviction that in his own queer way Dick loved her.

It was like nothing that she had ever known before. It lacked the gaiety, the spontaneous enthusiasm, the youthful obviousness, with which other men had made their approach to her. What she received from Dick was an immense respect, a quiet deference, a sobriety, such as she had only seen paid to older women. But behind it all was a sincerity, a force, that absolutely took her breath away. She found him a bundle of paradoxes. When he looked at her there was a suggestion almost of shyness in his eyes; and yet she was embarrassed sometimes at the manner in which he calmly shouldered his way through a roomful of people to come and sit down beside her. Always when he greeted her, it was with an icy politeness, as if he were meeting her for the first time; and yet, she had learned by experience, no one could get him away from her side until he decided that he had to go. There were times when he remained as silent as the grave in spite of every effort she made to entertain him; and then, suddenly, as though some inhibition had lifted from him, he would begin to talk as if his life depended upon it, as if the most important thing in the whole world at that moment

was that she should share what was going on in his mind.

She tried to compare him to his sister, and could find no trace of resemblance to Madge. He was just Dick, an individual whose like she had never met, sometimes so exasperating that she could have screamed at him, sometimes so attractive and appealing that she would have married him then and there if he had asked her to.

If he had asked her to! But the days grew into weeks, and the winter crept its cold way along; and although Dick kept on coming down, he did n't ask her!

The realization of that fact came to Virginia with something of a shock. She pondered it for many days, put herself through an examination of conscience, and ended by confessing to herself that she had been half-expecting him to, ever since Christmas, — not only half-expecting him to, but taking it for granted that he would.

By the time the last day of February had been torn off the calendar, however, and still he had n't said anything, she bit her lip and assured herself that he inevitably would the very next time that he came down.

The next time passed just as the last one had, — he brought her a book, laid himself out to be particularly nice — and departed on the eleven o'clock train, after urging her to come in to lunch with him the following Saturday and go to a matinée.

Virginia went up to bed that night, puzzled, bewildered, a tiny bit frightened, with a cross thread of anger running through it all . . . Was she making a fool of herself? Had she jumped to conclusions? Was Dick really in love with her at all? If

not, then why did he keep on coming? Why did he pick her out like this? Was this merely something English that she did n't know about? Did he intend to behave like a platonic sphinx for the next fifteen years, or what? . . . She would write him and refuse to go to the matinée! She would take care not to be home next time he came! She was n't going to be made a fool of by any man!

Savagely she flicked on the light over her writing table, and sat down and wrote him an icy, angry little note, in which she merely said that she could n't come in to the theater, giving no reason.

"There!" she said. "That 'll give him something to think about!"

Whereupon, rather thoughtfully, she had a bath and went to bed. An hour later, after she had been lying absolutely motionless, she suddenly hurled back the clothes and felt her way over to the writing table in the dark, caught up the note, and tore it into small pieces.

"Perhaps I *am* a fool, but I can't help it!" she said . . .

The sun came back at last, and the snow disappeared, and the red-brown sticky buttons that tipped the branches of trees loosened their hold upon the infant leaves within.

To Virginia they had never seemed so long in coming. Yet now they were here, she looked back upon the months of winter and marveled at the speed with which they had flashed by.

"Come along, Dad," she said, "let 's get out the golf sticks! I 'm going to take it seriously this year!"

"In that case," said Mr. Baird, "you 'll need a

better man than I to give you advice." A little smile crept into his eyes. "Why don't you go to the pro?"

Virginia shook her head. "Dick's promised to look me over," she said simply.

"Ah!" said Mr. Baird. "Then you'll have to take it very seriously, my dear! That boy has high standards!"

Not many days later Dick came driving down. The car was one of the first batch of the new model, — his model. The Bairds gathered round to admire it, and Dick yielded to the satisfaction of pointing out the changes and improvements, although, he wound up by saying, he was already on the watch to see how they could be bettered.

In the back of the car was his golf bag, and his real feelings were expressed in a look of gratitude when Mr. Baird said, "Well, we must n't keep them any longer, Mother! . . . Pop in, Virginia! And don't forget to keep your eye on the ball!"

Virginia got in beside Dick, and in a moment the two were alone in the spring sunshine.

It was only about ten o'clock in the morning and there was hardly any traffic. They ambled along at a quiet twenty miles an hour, both silent for a time, held by the sheer sparkle of the morning, Virginia humming a little song.

From time to time, however, Dick half turned his head and looked at her; and presently he took his hand from the wheel and put it over hers where it rested on the seat between them. The humming ceased abruptly, but her hand stayed where it was.

"Virginia!" said Dick. "I simply can't stick it any longer without telling you!"

For a moment the silence was absolute.

"Telling me . . . what?" The question was almost a whisper.

For some reason or other, both were gazing at the road ahead, as if they were frightened of each other's eyes.

"I've been wanting to tell you for ages," said Dick, "but I thought it would be a dirty trick if I did, — in fact, a crime! And so I've been waiting and waiting to see if I really was out of that war mess, that ghastly depression, that had made me a sort of brute beast when I first met you! It seemed to me that night at Madge's that I was a new man, but I was scared to death that it might be only a flash in the pan and that the whole damn business might get me again. And if it did get me, I was n't going to be such an outsider as to ask you to share it."

Virginia turned her hand over and locked her fingers in his. "Dick!" she said. "Oh, Dick!"

"I've still got an awful long way to go," said Dick, "before I'm likely to be human again, but I think I'm mostly out of it. In any case, I can't hold on to myself any more. Life 's so damn short, anyway! . . . Could you possibly take a chance, do you think? I love you most frightfully, Virginia!"

He was still staring at the road as he ended, when his hand was lifted and he felt the touch of Virginia's lips on it. "Oh, my God!" he said, — and the brakes squealed as he brought the car to a standstill.

Chapter Twelve

It was not until four more springs had each dropped its grain into the hopper that the widely separate lines of the South Brayton family converged again for a brief moment.

In these four springs the kings and captains had departed. Old allegiances were cast aside, and new sovereignties made loud proclamation. Like overripe fruit, governments had fallen to the ground and burst, and others had ripened. Momentarily exhausted peoples swung back with the pendulum after their surfeit of war and cried aloud for peace, like petulant children for a new toy. To take the place of worn-out and moribund creeds, new religions sprang up like thistles for a space, and like thistles withered again. A new generation shrugged its shoulders, disgusted, pushed back the empty chairs and demanded more and better jazz.

The bluish-orange light of London's theater district cast its strange blaze upon the streets. The rumbling undertone of traffic was pierced by the whistles of commissionaires and the honkings of taxis. The doors of His Majesty's Theater had just opened after the performance and the first limousines had crept up for their quota of colored cloaks and silk hats that began to flow like a tide from the emptying building.

Above their heads, in huge electric letters that could be read up and down the street, was the name

of the play whose opening they had just witnessed, — "'Inside that House,' by Thomas Wickens."

His Majesty's is a large theater and the audience had filled it. Presently, in the slow process of making their way out, two old men jostled each other. Simultaneously their hats were raised and two "I beg your pardon's" dropped like peas into a bucket.

Then one laughed and exclaimed, "Why, hullo, Brayton! . . . How do you do, Lady Brayton?"

Smiles and nods spread in the group.

"How do you do, General?" said Lady Brayton. "My daughter, Mrs. Baird — General Buffen-Owen! And my daughter-in-law, Mrs. Wickens!"

The General bowed again, in the manner of the old school, as Madge's eyes flashed over him. "Damn pretty woman!" he thought, adding, as his eyes went to Virginia, "And so 's she, b' God!" He nodded approvingly when Madge introduced a tall sunburned man as "my husband, Captain Baird!"

In the ears of Lord Brayton were still ringing the cries of "Author! Author!" with which his son had been hailed. He turned a rather puzzled countenance to his old friend.

"What did you think of it?" he said.

The General shrugged his shoulders. "It was over my head!" he said. "The theater 's changed since our day! I 've never questioned the beliefs that this play ridicules! But I 'm bound to admit that it leaves one asking some pretty big questions, and there 's no denying it 's a brilliant piece of work!"

Lady Brayton gave a little excited laugh. "And did n't you think Tom made a wonderful speech?"

The General pulled his moustache. "Indeed I did! . . . Brayton, I congratulate you on that son of yours. He 's a coming man, a regular chip of the old block, eh?"

Madge smiled broadly.

Lord Brayton slanted his head. "Yes," he said, "I always knew that he had the real stuff in him! Just a matter of time, that 's all!"

Madge gurgled audibly. Lady Brayton frowned and shook her head.

During this time they were edging towards the street. When they reached it, the General raised his hat again, bowed all round and with a cheery, "Bring him to the club for lunch some day, Brayton! I 'd enjoy meeting him!" swung off into the crowd.

It was not more than twenty steps to the Carlton, but Madge could contain herself no longer. She linked one arm in her husband's and the other in Virginia's, and said over her shoulder, "We 'll lead the way. You bring the Mater along, Gov'nor!" Then she urged the others forward and burst out, "Oh, how priceless! Did you hear that, Ted? I would n't have missed being in on this for anything! Do you realize that ever since the family bust-up the Gov'nor has absolutely refused to see Tom? But now that this second play of Tom's looks like being a winner, he has asked particularly that Tom should be included in the party to-night! Infinite possibilities for drama, eh! Stand by for an exhibition of British emotion!"

Ted chuckled. "How 'll I know when to begin standing by? — But, say, honey, where did you get that 'captain' stuff? I have n't heard it for a century, not since the war, in fact!"

"Oh!" said Madge. "That was just local color for the benefit of the Brass Hat, and I knew you would n't mind! . . . Here we are. I think I 'll dash upstairs and see how the infant prodigy is getting on. Coming, Virginia? Probably the Mater would like to, too. I think she 's exercising the privilege of all grandmothers and has a secret distrust of that nurse!"

"All right," said Ted. "But don't be too long! It always makes me nervous to be left alone with my respected father-in-law! How about my taking him down to the bar for a highball?"

"Great idea!" said Madge.

Within ten minutes of their entering the Carlton, the doors of His Majesty's were closed, the lights turned out, and beyond one or two young men and girls who lingered in the neighborhood of the stage door, there was no evidence that one of the most fashionable first nights had just taken place.

Presently, however, the stage door swung open and various "good nights" sounded in the passageway. Two men came out.

One of the waiting girls nudged her companion and said aloud, "That 's the author, see! The thin one! I 've seen his picture in the *Sketch!*"

Tom — now, as the son of his father, the Honorable Thomas Wickens — heard it and smiled. "The implication," he said, as they walked along, "is that you have put on weight, old man!"

Dick laughed. "By Jove!" he said, "It 's extraordinary to hear that cockney accent again! London seems to me changed beyond belief!"

"It 's you who 've changed!" said Tom.

"I suppose so," said Dick. "But, my dear old

man, I want to tell you that I 'm crazy about the play! I got more kick out of it than anything I 've seen or read in the last four years! There was a show in New York last year called ' The World We Live In ' and that made me sit up and cheer, but ' Inside That House ' goes miles deeper than that! It shows up the whole blinking system! "

Tom gripped his brother's elbow for a fraction of a moment. " Thanks, old thing! " he said quietly. " That 's damn nice of you! "

" Talk about real internationalism! " said Dick. " I 've never conceived such a dramatic argument in my life. It ought to have the most amazing effect! "

Tom laughed. " Oh, effect! " he said. " The crowd 'll come and gape for a while and say ' How brilliant! How wonderful! ' and at the next election the conservatives will sweep the country, — or, for that matter, the liberals or the socialists! It does n't make any difference which! The same old game will go right on! To-night they stood up and yelled ' Author! ' because peace is quite the thing just now! They were tickled for the moment by something of the same kind of idea for which, years ago, they put me behind barbed wire! Effect? Nil! It 's the old, old merry-go-round, that 's all! "

Both remained silent until they had turned the corner of the theater.

" Do you remember," said Dick, " when we lunched in Dean Street the day before Madge and I sailed? And you drank to the sweaty job in front of us? "

" Oh . . . yes! " said Tom.

" I wish to God," said Dick, " that I 'd been able to do as much towards it as you have with this play! "

"Oh, rot!" said Tom. "I merely write about internationalism, and you and Madge go and live it! You're a lucky old devil, Dick! Your little Virginia's one in a million! . . . Come down and have a whisky and soda with me! I need it badly. First nights are a terrific strain on the nerves of all concerned,— and apparently the Gov'nor and I are to have one of our own in a few minutes!"

"Oh, that!" said Dick. He laughed and shrugged his shoulders. "As my kid brother-in-law would say, it's all blaa!"

"Why do you think so?"

"Well, frankly," said Dick, "I don't think it means a thing. He pushed us out and there's nothing to go back to. We've made our own lives!"

"I know!" said Tom. "There's probably nothing in it; but, damn it, he's old, and, after all, he does want to make peace!"

Dick shrugged his shoulders. "As you said a moment ago, 'Peace is quite the thing!'" He laughed. "The Gov'nor still has his ear to the ground, eh? I suppose he thinks it's safe now that he's got the double protection of his being a peer and your being a successful playwright!"

Tom raised his eyebrows. "Isn't that rather rubbing it in, old man?"

"It's the truth!" said Dick, "and anyway, weren't you rubbing it in to all the others in your play? Why should the Gov'nor be let off? . . . Oh, well, the whole damn game is nothing but compromise. I suppose we'll have to give him another chance! . . . Go ahead!" and he followed his brother into the hotel.

THE END